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THE
GAMMA
INTERVIEW:
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New Frontiers in Fiction

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June 1984

Robert Turner is a professional writer in the true sense. In twenty-five years of freelance writing he has sold over 1,000 stories to mystery-suspense, western, and men's magazines, thirty-five novels, and twenty-one scripts to Alfred Hitchcock, Johnny Staccato, Mike Hammer, Miami Undercover, and other top-ranking television shows. One of his much anthologized short stories, *Don't Go Away Mad*, has been optioned for movie production. He is an active member of the Mystery Writers of America. Hobbies are fishing and tennis, and he has a passion for horse racing. He used to contribute articles, he tells us, to *Turf and Sport Digest*, but "I stopped researching at the track, because it became too expensive." Despite his prolific output, he has not entered the science-fiction field until now, with the following story, written especially for GAMMA. In typical Turner fashion, this story is already being considered by a movie producer.

THE GIRL OF PARADISE PLANET

Robert Turner

George Prentiss stood at the edge of the silent green sea, unmindful of his wife Evvie's eyes upon him. He was staring across the waters, thinking: *I wonder if she'll be out there today.* The dark green water — the Sea of Serenity, some space poet had named it because no breeze or turbulence ever ruffled its calm — stretched, unblemished, to the distant horizon, giving no clue.

He glanced up as a space rocket thundered toward the boiling yellow clouds that gave Paradise

Planet its perpetual day, probably taking vacationing tourists back to their jobs on Earth, Mars, or Venus.

George Prentiss sighed. There were times he wished he had a job to go back to. Brought back to the world of reality, he flexed his muscles in the thin plastic diving suit and began to adjust the under-water mask over his face.

"What in the world are you up to now, George," Evvie asked, behind him, her voice brimming with exasperation.

George considered briefly ignoring her, pretending he didn't hear, but he knew it would do no good. He pushed the clear mask up to his forehead and said, "I'm putting on my underwater equipment."

"Of course, dammit. I can see that."

"Well," he said calmly, "I'd thought it was obvious, but when you didn't seem to know—"

"What I meant was," she said, forcing herself to be patient, "is why are you putting it on?"

"Because," George told her, "I find it rather difficult to breathe underwater without oxygen equipment. I found the same thing difficult back on Earth, and I imagine here it's no different. I'm wearing the suit just in case any evil creatures of the deep try to make you a widow before I'd like you to be."

Evvie said: "Don't try to be clever with me, Georgie dear. I still can't see why a grown man is fooling around with such childish toys." She stared at the tightfitting suit he wore. "God, but you are getting a pot!"

George laughed. Her insults failed to disturb him anymore. "It's the same one I've always had," he said, patting himself comfortably. "I've just stopped holding it in. You ought to try it some time. I mean not holding *yours* in. It real-

ly feels great."

"You go to hell," Evvie told him, her face flaming. She stretched out full length and rubbed both hands along her tummy, above the wisp of material that passed for a bathing suit. "I keep myself in shape. Just because I'm sixty-five, I don't have to look it. See? Not a bulge."

George Prentiss looked. There was something anachronistic about the scene. He could picture the same tableaux five hundred years ago — back in the twentieth century before the age of space travel beyond the solar system — when a girl of thirty-five might have said the same thing lying on the sand in Miami Beach, Florida.

Evvie did have her good points — physically, anyway — but he was not in the mood to admit it. "You're lying down," he said. "Law of physics or something."

"George, stop trying to avoid the issue."

"What issue?"

"Those underwater toys you've been playing with all week."

"I wouldn't really call them toys, Evvie. It just so happens that I like to swim around in the water, watching the undersea life, sometimes even just drifting around and dozing and daydreaming a little." He thought of the girl he'd seen at the mouth of the under-

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water cave almost a week ago, and he smiled at the memory. "Some of the life on this planet is pretty fascinating to watch. I quite enjoy it, Evvie. It relaxes me. Sometimes I even forget for awhile that I've got no children, few real friends, too much money, and a bored wife."

Evvie clucked her tongue. "That's what I was afraid of."

"That I was enjoying myself?"

She ignored the sarcasm. "That you're getting senile."

"Nonsense, I'm only ninety-three, although sometimes," he said with a sad shake of his head, "you have the facility to make me feel much older."

"Frankly you worry me, George. I mean, the way you've been acting lately. You really should see Dr. Hartung."

"I am seeing him. Twice a week. Seems a little crazy, doesn't it, that a planet that's one huge vacation resort should have a practicing psychiatrist."

"What does the doctor say?"

"That I'm trying to escape from the world of reality. In fact, he's quite intrigued. He thinks I may even succeed. He says I'm quite ingenious."

"Succeed at what, for God's sake?"

"In escaping," George said, mat-

ter-of-factly. "You know, I think he'd just as soon I did. He'd like to have me out of the way so he can have you all to himself."

"George, really! Honestly, I give up even trying to talk to you. So just go right head on your stubborn way, plunge headlong into a nervous breakdown. Don't let anybody try to help you."

George shook his head. "Doc Hartung says I won't do that. He says I'm too stubborn to take the easy way out."

"Go!" Evvie said, pouting. "Go, go, go. Look under the water, paddle around, have your day-dreams or whatever you do out there. Just go right ahead. Don't mind me."

"I'm afraid I don't anymore, dear."

"What?"

"Well, you said it was senseless and stupid for a man so rich to have to work anymore, so you had me sell the business, remember? I was in love with you then, so I wanted to please you. I kept giving up things, my little pleasures like the home workshop and drinking, to make you happy. I even gave up my friends — or rather they gave me up because of you. You insisted we come to this overgrown vacation resort a billion billion miles from Earth, so here we

are. Remember, Evvie?"

"What are you getting at?" She sat up rigidly, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Nothing much, except I'm *not* going to give up going out into the water with my diving gear. A man's got to have some pleasure in life — even with you as his wife."

She glared at him, and suddenly her doll-pretty face screwed up. "You bastard!" she cried. "You snide, loathsome bastard! I — I don't know why I ever married you."

"Yes you do, Evvie," he said quietly. "Think about it."

He walked to the edge of the green ocean, not looking back at her, adjusting the mask over his face once more, and then moved into the water. The water was calm, the only waves those he stirred up with his movements. Through the thin skintight suit he could tell the water was warm, warmer even than the constantly warm air of the planet. He walked gradually out, the ocean floor falling away slowly beneath him, and then when he was neck-deep he lifted his feet, thrusting himself forward.

He went down through the brightly lit water which enveloped him like a warm cloud, propelling

himself slowly forward with gentle movements of his arms and legs, hardly disturbing the water. He smiled as a school of multicolored luminescent fish flashed beneath him in rainbow flight; he tried to count them, but they were gone.

He paused to watch a blue crab-like creature with stalk eyes scuttle along the bottom in search of — what? Food? A mate? Perhaps even it didn't know.

Around him there was only silence and the warmth of the water enclosing his body. Suddenly there was no movement, not even from the plants that resembled the seaweed of Earth. He hovered, closing his eyes, bathed in the euphoria of the moment. There were no troubles here, only the wonderful, relaxed, peaceful feeling of which he had now become a part.

Technically, he was a visitor to Aldebaran III, but the early colonists a hundred years ago had lost no time in renaming it Paradise Planet. The weather was always comfortably warm. Luminescent clouds completely covered the planet, bathing the land in a golden glow and leaving no room for night or darkness; Earth time was used only as a convenience for those who for some neurotic reason felt a compulsion to know the time. The planet had no practical

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value as a military base or as a source of raw materials and there were no inhabitants to worry about, so it became a resort, a haven for those who could afford it.

Like me, he thought without bitterness, who has the money to do everything but who does nothing instead!

I was hoping you'd come back, a voice said, in his mind. *I'm not afraid of you today.*

George opened his eyes, puzzled at first.

You're not? he said, not really saying it, but just sort of thinking it.

No, because I've been watching you, all the other times and I've decided that you're quite all right and won't try to harm me.

Of course not. But where are you?

He turned his head slowly, peering through the underwater mask. He didn't see anything until he had turned nearly full around. Then he saw her swimming toward him, some ten yards away, as he had seen her the first time almost a week before.

The first few seconds he was so startled to see that she wasn't wearing any kind of underwater breathing equipment, that he hardly noticed that neither did she wear any bathing suit.

When he did finally become aware of this he did not find it shocking, nor even sexually exciting, though her body was the most perfect one he'd ever seen. She appeared to be about twenty years old. She had small lovely dark features and her teeth glistered in an open, child-like smile. Her long black hair flowed through the water like silk.

Will you stay out here with me a little while? her thought came into his mind.

I — I don't know. You won't be able to stay down very long, anyhow.

I don't understand.

How will you breathe?

The way I always do.

Oh! You mean you don't have any trouble breathing under water? George Prentiss began to understand, now. *I think I see. You're not real, are you? You're just a figment of my imagination. That's all right, though. I like you, anyhow. So, don't go away.*

Oh, I'm quite real. That's funny. I was wondering if you were. Real, I mean. You look so strange with that thing over your face. Why do you wear it?

Well, I couldn't see very well or breathe at all, down here, without them.

You couldn't? You must not

live down here, then.

Under the water? No, I certainly don't. I wish that I did.

You should. It's wonderful here. Don't you like it?

Very much.

Then, why don't you stay down here?

Well, I'm afraid my wife, Evvie, wouldn't stand for it. He thought about it, briefly, decided the idea wasn't very practical, even if it had been possible. No, I'm afraid I can't do that.

Your wife? That's a funny word. What is wife?

That's a good question. It means different things to different people. I'm afraid I'm a little mixed up on the subject, myself. You see I have had three of them and always, either I didn't get along with them or they didn't get along with me. Anyhow, something went wrong.

You've had three wifes?

Wives. Yes. Evvie's the third. We don't get along, either. That's why I'm out here.

A wife is a woman — like I am?

Well, not quite like you.

Why do you stay with this one, if you don't get along together?

I don't know if I can really explain that or not. Let's say that I'm resigned to my fate, or something. I've decided that if I did

leave Evvie, it would cost me a lot of money, a lot of trouble and time and grief and then I'd probably turn around and do the same thing all over again. I'd take another woman for a wife and I'd make the same mistake all over again.

Why?

I'm not sure if this is the right answer, but it's something like this, anyhow: Because I made the big mistake, way back, many years ago and now, when I try to rectify it, I merely compound it. You see I should have taken a wife, back when I was young, when people are supposed to get married. But in those days I was too busy making money, being a big shot in the business world and I didn't think I needed to settle for one woman; in fact, I wouldn't have been satisfied with one. And when you have lots of money, you don't need to be. Then suddenly, I found myself middle-aged and a little tired and decided I wanted to settle down with one woman and lead a normal, happy life, raise a family, that sort of thing.

I see. At least I think I do. But you weren't able to do that?

Hardly. It was too late. I was too old. You see, in addition to understanding and companionship, I also still wanted youth and

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beauty. Youth and beauty can't be faked, past a certain point, but the other qualities I was searching for, can be. So I was fooled, you see, three times: Youth and Beauty, you see, often doesn't want to be tied down right away with a family. It wants all the things, excitement, fast living, continual change, that I had already too much of, was tired of. You see?

I'm not sure . . . But do we have to talk about that any more?

It was strange. He should be asking *her* the questions. But then he knew it didn't really matter who she was or where she came from. The important thing was, she was here.

Of course not. What would you like to talk about?

I don't like talking, too much. Let's just do things. Can you do this?

She was in the water directly under him, now and suddenly, she arched her back and moved slowly, gracefully over in a complete underwater somersault.

Once, in a photography magazine, George Prentiss had seen a photo series of a nude model doing the exact same thing. He remembered that he had been fascinated by the aesthetic perfection in the fluidity of motion displayed. It

was the same way now.

As he watched, she performed a whole series of underwater ballet movements. He was a little sorry when she finished. He could have watched her perform forever.

When she glided under him, quite close, she smiled. *Now, you do some tricks for me.*

I'm afraid I can't. Do you have a name?

I am called Irlana, she said.

Irlana, he thought, testing the name, *it's a very pretty name. And justly so. You're a beautiful girl, Irlana.*

I am? Nobody's ever thought that about me, before.

Oh. Have you met other men down here?

No. I've never been with anyone, before. I've always been alone. I never minded it too much but I probably shall, now. I like being with someone. I like your being here. I like you.

That's very interesting. You hardly know me, yet you like me. Why?

You're kind and you're pleasant and you're nice to be with. I don't really know. I guess because I just like being with you. Say, why couldn't I be your — what was the word? — your wife?

He thought about that. He began to get very excited, at the

thought. All the delightful possibilities paraded before his mind. Then he remembered where he was. The whole thing seemed so very real, that he almost forgot. To reassure himself, now, that it wasn't real, he reached out to take hold of her hand. He was surprised to feel her take hold of his fingers in a firm, warm, clasp. He felt her fingers move, slightly in his. There was nothing at all ethereal about the sensation.

He told himself that this was ridiculous. It was fine and very enjoyable up to a point, of course, but not to be able to fully convince himself that the whole incident was imaginary, could be dangerous. To settle the matter, he took hold of her wrist, started to lift her toward the surface of the water.

She struggled to break free from his grip. *Wait, she protested. What are you doing?*

I'd like to see you in the light, out of the water, that's all.

But you can't!

Why not?

If I come out of the water you won't be able to see me. And I can't live out of the water — not for long.

We'll see. He yanked firmly and his own head and shoulders broke out of the water and directly in

front of him there was a disturbance on the surface. The bright sunlight, glaring on the calm water, hurt his eyes for a moment and he thought that might be the reason he couldn't see her. But when he looked again, there was nothing there. Then he heard a strained, gasping sound and her voice in his head said:

Please let me go back under the water. I can't breathe. I'm starting to choke. Please, George!

And then he became very definitely aware that he was still holding her wrist. He could feel the slim strength and the warmth of it against his fingers.

Slowly, George Prentiss opened his hand. The water before him parted as though something had sunk into it. He began to feel a little dizzy. He pushed the under-water mask up onto his forehead. He stayed there, treading water, for a few moments, breathing in deep gulps of air through his nose and then he turned his head and looked back toward shore, at the private beach and the big, thirty-room winter home he was renting back up behind the dunes. He could see the figure of his wife, still reclining on the lounge chair, sun-bathing. He saw that he was about three or four hundred yards from shore, farther out

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than he'd ever come before.

He thought about his experience underwater and knew that it was impossible — it had to be. At the same time, he wished that it had been true.

A few minutes later, he once again adjusted the mask and lowered himself into the water. For nearly fifteen minutes, he paddled around that area. He saw nothing except a school of fish with spiral antennae. A little sadly, he started back toward the shore.

Standing beside his wife, toweling himself dry, she said, without opening her eyes: "I was beginning to think you had drowned, George."

"Oh? Sorry to disappoint you," he said.

"What in the world do you see out there, underwater, that can be so fascinating, for so long?"

"I was having a secret rendezvous with a mermaid," he said seriously.

"A what?"

"A mermaid. And she was quite young, about twenty, and very, very beautiful. We had quite a conversation."

Evvie's eyes opened, looked at her husband and then closed again. "Where did she come from?" she said.

"Oh, she lives out there. I'd

guess she's one of the few natives left on this planet, sort of a lost underwater race."

"What? What kind of rubbish are you talking, George Prentiss? This planet has no natives!"

"It's a good thing you didn't see her, Evvie. You'd have been quite shocked. She was naked."

Evvie sat bolt upright, staring at him, roundeyed.

"You know," he said. "No clothes on. Nothing. Not even a bathing suit. Bare."

She kept right on staring at him. Then she managed: "You're crazy. You really are crazy!"

"It's possible," he said, starting up toward the house, smiling to himself. It was the first time he'd seen Evvie really shaken in a long time. It was quite satisfying. He couldn't help feeling a little pleased with himself.

But he wondered, when he paused to consider it, what he had really seen out there. At first he'd thought it was merely a daydream. But he'd felt Irlana, and he was certain she was real — unless, of course, it was only a hallucination.

After he had showered and dressed, George phoned Dr. Hartung. After the usual preliminaries, George said: "Doc, what does it mean if I'm having hallucinations?"

There was a silence at the other

end for a few moments, then Dr. Hartung said, warily: "Ah, what kind, Mr. Prentiss? I mean, what form do they take and when and how often do you have them? Under what circumstances?"

As matter-of-factly as possible, then, George related his experience.

"I see," Dr. Hartung said, but it was obvious by his tone of voice that he really didn't. "Of course, there's always the possibility that it could be some prismatic trick of the sun cutting through the water near the surface. I'm not a chemist, but I understand the water here is not really the H₂O we know on Earth and it might very well have some unique refractive properties. It might have been that, perhaps combined with, say, a floating batch of seaweed, shaped that way and looking very much human, in the distortion of depth. Wouldn't you say that was possible?"

"Hal!" George said, chuckling. "No patch or batch of seaweed was shaped the way this girl was."

"Well . . ."

"And none of those explanations could possibly account for the fact that we talked with each other — at least, communicated. And I touched her, remember? I could

feel her fingers and her wrist in my grip, quite plainly."

"Well, after the visual deception, it would be likely for your imagination to take over on other aspects of it. You *are* highly imaginative, you know, Mr. Prentiss."

"If I imagined *this* whole incident, I'm more imaginative than I thought!"

"What is your *personal* reaction, Mr. Prentiss? Do you have any explanation?"

"Nope. But I find it very pleasant to think back upon."

"Do you think it will recur?"

"I've been thinking about that. I surely hope so. It's like — well, doc, did you ever awake from a very pleasant dream and then try to force yourself right back to sleep so that it might continue?"

"In other words, you will seek a recurrence? You'll go out there again, tomorrow, to approximately the same place?"

George sighed. "I'm afraid I'll have to. I couldn't stand not knowing whether or not it will happen again. If it doesn't — then, fine, I'll know I was just seeing things, or at least accept the idea. If it does recur . . ."

"Hmmm. Well, keep me posted, Mr. Prentiss. I'll see you at your regular visit on Friday, anyhow. Right?"

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"Check," George said and hung up.

During the rest of the day, George Prentiss was possessed of that calm, contented feeling of well-being that is at least one form of happiness. He was almost smug about it. He oozed it without really knowing why. Several of the servants appeared quite startled when they heard him humming to himself and noticed the increased sprightliness of his step. All through dinner, his wife, Evvie, eyed him with a sort of awed suspicion. She couldn't seem to keep her eyes from him. Once she said:

"George, what's the matter with you? Whatever it is you're doing, stop it, please?"

He smiled at her, tolerantly. "I wasn't aware that I *was* doing anything, dear. I wasn't speaking, or jittering or chomping my food with undue enthusiasm or any of the things that usually annoy you. To what alleged act were you referring? That you wish me to stop doing?"

She looked confused. She looked a little like a hurt, bewildered child. There was a touch of panic in her voice. "I — I don't know, exactly. It's just that you're so — well — I just can't explain it. You're just not *you*, I guess. Please

tell me what it is, George. What's the matter with you?"

"To the contrary, absolutely nothing. I haven't felt so fit, really, in months, perhaps years."

Evvie's eyes suddenly narrowed. "That girl out in the water you told me about. I didn't take you seriously when you told me about her, but it would be just like you to tell me the truth because you know I wouldn't believe it."

George laughed. "Now, that's female logic for you."

"Are you having an affair with her?"

George raised an eyebrow. "You're a little ahead of things, Evvie. I just met her. She's quite fascinating, though. We never got around to finding out just who she was or where she came from, but she might very well be one of the few surviving natives of Paradise Planet. You know, if I play my cards right, I may help her repopulate the place!"

Evvie stopped eating. She set down her knife and fork resolutely. She had grown pale under her heavy makeup. She blurted:

"Was she really — I mean, actually — young and beautiful and — and well, you know, not even wearing a swim suit?"

George nodded, smiling at the memory.

Evvie curled her long pale hands into fists and pounded one of them against the table, causing the silver to jump.

"George Prentiss, I want you to tell me the truth, right now, and stop all this nonsense. Did you really see such a girl or did you just imagine it. Everyone knows this planet never had any intelligent life on it. Did you just make up this whole thing to torture me?"

"I'm afraid I can't say, dear, because I don't know. I don't know which of the things you mentioned is really the truth."

Evvie stood up, pushed her chair back from the table. Her eyes were misty with near-crying. "I'm going to call Dr. Hartung about this, right away. I — I'm truly alarmed about you, George. I'm going to have the doctor come right over and talk to you."

"I already called him," George said. "I told him the whole thing."

"Oh?" She sat down again in the chair. Collapsed, might be a better word. "What — what did he say?"

"Not much. He couldn't decide, either, though I'm quite certain he thought it was an hallucination, of sorts. Anyhow, he didn't seem to be too perturbed. He told me to keep him posted . . . You look

quite piqued, Evvie. Perhaps a little jolt of Earth brandy would help."

She arose from the chair quite slowly, deliberately, this time and sort of floated sideways away from the table. In a hollow, edge-of-breaking voice, she said: "I have a horrible headache, George. I'd better go lie down."

For a moment after she was gone, George Prentiss felt almost ashamed of himself and a little sorry for Evvie. But not for long.

The next "morning," he awakened earlier than usual, feeling more refreshed than he had felt upon arising, in some years. The challenge of his new adventure intrigued him. He didn't eat breakfast before going down to the beach because that would mean having to wait an hour or so before going into the water. Since Evvie apparently wasn't up yet, he went down to their private beach alone. He found himself trembling with anticipation, as he donned the underwater gear. At the same time he kept cautioning himself that he must be prepared not to see his underwater friend, today. Apparition or not, it was quite unlikely that the same incident would again occur. Still, he could not keep from loping into the water like a teen age boy.

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Submerged, he swam out to approximately the same section of water that had been the scene of yesterday's adventure. He circled around out there for a full five minutes and failed to see any sign of the girl. He was just about to give up, appalled at the horribly leaden, letdown feeling of disappointment that pervaded him, when he heard a strange sound; or rather, the strange sound was suddenly in his head. It went:

Psssst! Psssst!

Frantically, he looked all around him, but couldn't find her. Yet he was sure it was she who had made the sound and then she helped him out, the words coming very faintly into his mind:

I'm down here. Down here. I'm hiding.

He twisted around once again and now he saw her; part of her, at least. She was down on the bottom and she was covered with sand up to her neck.

Hi, he communicated. What's this, a new game? Hide-and-go-seek, underwater style?

Oh, no, it's no game. I'm scared. I'm hiding. I had a very narrow escape. Don't try to come near me. He's watching you.

George felt a cold chill run through him. *Hiding from who?* he thought. He started to correct

himself, to make it *whom*, but then he remembered this wasn't Evvie, who kept nagging at him about his poor grammar.

Him! she thought frantically at him. *The killer. Over there to your right. Be careful. I don't know if he'll attack you or not. I think he's afraid of you. It's probably that mask you wear over your face.*

George turned slowly to the right and saw what she was talking about. Involuntarily, he gasped, and his heart came up against the back of his teeth. He had never before suffered such a sudden, almost physically painful, wrench of fear.

About thirty yards away, cruising in small, nervous circles, was a huge creature unlike anything he'd seen before. The top part of it seemed almost human, hammer-headed, with long tendrils resembling a moustache on its face, and two short arms extending from its shoulders; the bottom part of it was fish. It resembled some grotesque Pan with a fishtail instead of goat's legs. As it flashed through the water, George saw that it had sharp rows of shark teeth and the edges of its "arms" were like razors.

George Prentiss remained perfectly still, paralyzed with a fear

so violent he was almost nauseated. Then, gradually, as the creature showed no indication of attacking, in fact seemed quite wary, the fear began to slip away.

He's been hanging around for over an hour, looking for me, the girl's voice said in his head. He just missed me and I had a chance to go to the bottom and stir up a big enough cloud of sand to throw him off until I could crawl away and hide.

That's terrible, George said. We — why, I'll have to do something. You just can't stay there, half buried like that, forever. Maybe I can frighten him off.

Can you make bubbles? They're afraid of bubbles, sometimes.

I can try.

If you could swim slowly toward him and make a lot of bubbles, that might do it.

Yes. George thought about doing that but he couldn't get a clear picture of it in his mind. He just somehow couldn't see himself, floundering toward that underwater monster, blowing silly bubbles.

I don't blame you, though, if you don't want to do it, the girl told him. It is dangerous. Maybe you'd just better go away. If he should realize you're afraid of him —

Wait a minute, George interrupted. I'm not exactly afraid. Merely cautious. I was — ah — just sort of figuring out a plan of action. We've got to get rid of him, no matter what!

Oh, I thought you were too brave to let him frighten you, you're so big and strong.

George felt himself puffing up. He wished he had feathers so he could fluff them. If the alien creature had been a fire-breathing dragon, it would no longer have frightened him.

Well, here goes, he told her.

He pulled in as deep a breath of air as possible and then upended himself to swim underwater toward the monster. As he did so, he forced air slowly out from the sides of his face mask and a rather impressive string of air bubbles resulted, streaming toward the surface.

The creature had stopped swimming now and remained poised, watching him. George began to twist and as violently as possible, now, kick his legs and wave his arms. He moved to within twenty yards of the monster, then ten. Now his lungs began to ache with the exertion. The stream of bubbles from the face mask had subsided to a thin trickle. George felt his eyes begin to bulge with the

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strain. He saw that the creature still hadn't moved, was beginning to seem bored by the whole business.

George had visions of himself tiring from the exertion, weak and helpless, dangling before the creature like some sort of appetizing bait.

George could almost feel that huge, undershot mouth, with its rows of dagger-like teeth, slashing at him. Yet he knew that he couldn't turn away until he had forced the monster to leave the area.

The creature seemed almost bored by George's futile attempts to shoo him off. It turned, swishing its tail, and suddenly its bulbous eyes pivoted and a gleam of discovery seemed to light them. The creature's mouth opened hungrily, and rows of glistening teeth flashed.

He's seen me! the girl's voice shouted in George's mind.

He glanced at her, and saw her scrambling from the sand in a panic. The creature poised like a coiled spring, ready to leap upon the girl.

George acted, unthinking, instinctively hurling himself through the water. The creature loomed before his vision, frighteningly ugly. He reached out with balled fists

and struck at it as hard as he could. The blows glanced off tough, scaly hide, but the monster recoiled before this unexpected attack, hesitated briefly, and then scurried off and out of sight.

George watched it go, anger surging within him, yet feeling sick at the knowledge of what the creature could have done to him with that heavy tail, the razor-edged arms, the rows of needle teeth.

He fought off the feeling of nausea as he saw the girl swimming toward him. He watched clinging bits of sand washing from her supple, creamy-skinned young body.

"Oh, you were wonderful, wonderful! she communicated. *You really sent him scurrying. He won't be back to bother us, now. Not today, anyhow. How can I ever thank you?*

Before he had a chance to answer her, she swam close to him and he felt the warmth of her arms as they curled about his neck and she pressed close. Her lips pressed against his throat.

You're wonderful, wonderful, she told him.

George Prentiss struggled to free himself from her embrace but not too enthusiastically.

When she finally broke away,

he told her: *You'd better not do that again. Please!*

Still hugging his neck with her hands, she leaned back and gazed up at him, wistfully, pouting her lips a little.

Why? You don't like me to do that? You did not enjoy it?

Well, yes — uh — that is, no. What I mean is, of course I enjoyed it, but, well, if you should do it again I might not be able to control myself. I'm only human, you know, even if you're not. No telling what might happen.

Her gaze, innocent and wondering, moved over his face. *I don't understand. You say you did like it and I enjoyed being close to you, so why shouldn't we do it? What could possibly happen?*

Oh, I — I don't know how to explain. George groaned to himself. He fought briefly, ineffectively, with the turmoil of emotion storming within him and then gave it up. *Maybe you're right. To hell with it. What could? . . .*

When George Prentiss got back to the beach, Evvie was already in the lounge chair, rubbing suntan lotion onto her shoulder. While he walked toward her, she called out:

"Well, good mornig, Father Neptune. And how is your beautiful, nude little sea urchin this morn-

ing?"

"What?" George said, startled suddenly from the depths of ecstatic memory. Then her words penetrated and he felt color flooding his face. "Oh, shut up, Evvie," he told her.

She laughed. "That's more like it, George. Now, you're in character. It's a good thing you don't try to put over that cock-and-bull story about the girl again, today. I've been watching you out there, all the while, through these." She held up a pair of binoculars.

George stopped still, staring at her. He gulped. "You have?"

"Certainly. And all you were doing was floundering and cavorting around like some playful, silly porpoise. Completely alone, too, I might add."

George grinned, remembering the native girl's invisibility then continued on up the beach.

"When you get up to the house," Evvie called after him, "tell Dorcas to send me down some breakfast. I was so worried about you when I heard you'd come down here so early, I didn't stop to eat."

George walked on past her, as though he hadn't even heard. Evvie stared at him, frowning. "Did you hear me, George? And for God's sake, stop that posturing and strutting when you walk. I thought

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you weren't going to bother holding in your stomach, any more?"

"What stomach?" George asked, dreamily, patting his sucked-in middle. He continued on across the beach, with long, forceful strides, shoulders erect.

That night, right after dinner, Dr. Hartung called George. He explained: "Sorry to jump the gun on you, Mr. Prentiss, but I've been thinking about you and my curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't wait for you to call. What happened, today?"

"Ah!" George said.

"You saw her again, eh?"

"Mmmmm-mm!" George said.

"I see. I've been doing some special research on this subject. Evvie —" he colored — "Mrs. Prentiss, that is, told me you said the girl was a surviving native of this planet. However, there has been no record of anybody ever having lived here. Obviously, then, that is not the answer."

George shrugged. He had asked the girl where she'd come from, and she'd verified that she was part of a lost race of Aldebaran III. There were perhaps a hundred of them in the entire Sea of Serenity, unable to come onto dry land because they could exist only in the life-giving water.

But then, wouldn't an hallucin-

ation have told him the same thing, he wondered.

He pushed the thought from his mind. No, she was too real to be an hallucination!

"Tell me, Mr. Prentiss," Dr. Hartung pursued, do you remember your particular personal reactions, when as an adolescent, you first learned about mermaids?"

George chuckled. "Yes. I must've been a very hip juve, though. The whole notion struck me as being very impractical. What good were they?"

"Oh!" Dr. Hartung seemed taken aback. "You mean, then, you weren't ever overly fascinated with the idea that there might *be* such creatures?" He sounded disappointed.

"Uh-uh. Try again, Doc. And please believe this Irlana is no mermaid. I can vouch for that." He winked. "There's nothing fishy about this girl."

"Well," Hartung said. "Do you feel all right, every other way? How about the continual tiredness and the headaches?"

"Gone, Doc. I feel fine. Absolutely fine."

"Glad to hear it. But I'll be seeing you tomorrow, at our regular Friday session, won't I? Just the same?"

"I suppose so," George said,

making a mental note to cancel any future appointments. "See you, Doc."

Sometime in the middle of the sleep period, George Prentiss had the nightmare. It was terrifyingly real. He could actually see the alien creature attacking the girl, underwater, tearing her to bits. She kept calling to him to help her, but he couldn't, somehow. In the dream there didn't seem to be any real reason. He just couldn't get to her to help her. At the end of it, he awakened, soaking with perspiration and trembling.

He got out of his bed and lit a cigarette and paced his room. He didn't go back to sleep the rest of the "night." He sat at the desk in his bedroom, figuring things out. At a little after 0700 hours (Earth time) he televised a local engineering firm.

"You're serious about this, Mr. Prentiss?" the man said. Even on the small telescreen, his look was dubious.

"Of course, I'm serious. I'm not the type to play practical jokes so early in the day after being up half the night. Can you do it or not? I'm in a hurry."

"Well, let's go over it once more, roughly and quickly. You already have a fresh water pool and now you want another one built and

you want it set up so that sea water, direct from the Sea of Serenity is pumped into it every day."

"Check."

"And you want a natural sandy bottom in this pool, made of sand dredged up from the bottom of the sea?"

"Zip!"

"And you want work to start immediately?"

"Right. How long before the thing will be finished?"

"Well, this is a big job, Mr. Prentiss. Shall we say a week, seven days at the outside?"

"You can say that if you want and I say there'll be a thousand Earth credits a day, bonus, for every day *under* seven days it takes you to do the job."

"Um," the engineer said, trying not to show surprise. "Ah, we can put all this in writing, of course, Mr. Prentiss?"

"We can chisel it in stone, if you'll just stop quibbling and hang up and get busy on it."

Out in the water, an hour later, George Prentiss said, rather, communicated: *So you see, just the possibility that you might not be here one morning when I came out, that you might have been killed by some other monster, nearly drove me out of my mind. It*

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will continue to do so, until I know you're really safe. So I had to do something about it.

It was sweet of you to worry but there really isn't much need for it. Those creatures seldom come in this close. Only once in awhile.

It might only take once. I can't take the slightest chance. I — well — I just can't lose you, that's all.

She trailed her fingertips along his jaw and cupped his chin and then snuggled against his chest. I don't want you to lose me, either. I'll go wherever you want me to.

You will?

Of course.

You won't mind it? I mean, of course, it'll probably be a little confining, but —

That won't matter, as long as you'll be able to spend more time with me, so long as it'll make you happy to have me there.

Man, oh, man! He hugged her close. And they think I'm crazy!

Who does?

Oh, just some people. Some people who don't matter, any more, honey.

Is your wife one of them? Doesn't she matter any more?

I'm afraid not very much.

What will she say about my being in this new pool you're having built? What will she do?

I'm not sure. Frankly, I don't much care.

She made an impish face at him. Well, that's one thing you won't have to worry about.

Why?

She won't even know I'm there. She won't be able to see me.

She won't?

Irlana shook her black tresses. Your wife wears a red bathing suit and has a v-shaped scar on her right thigh?

Yes! You mean she's been out here?

She was swimming out here yesterday, looking for me, I suppose. But I hid in the sand and she passed close by but couldn't see me. I can do the same in your pool.

Yes, that's true, he admitted. But he wondered to himself, what would Evvie do if she discovered Irlana in the pool, unable to escape?

The worried look on his face must have conveyed itself to Irlana, for she frowned. He forced a laugh and reached out to tousle the wet silkiness of her hair. She laughed, too, and glided in close to him, affectionately.

That day George Prentiss stayed out in the water much longer than the other days. He was so thoroughly enjoying himself that

he completely lost track of time. When he walked up onto the beach, he was surprised to find not only his wife, Evvie, but Dr. Hartung waiting there for him. George could tell by the tight, almost wizened expression on Evvie's face that she was furious with him.

"I've been out there a long time, I guess. What time is it?"

"A lot you care, you miserable —"

"Please, Mrs. Prentiss," Dr. Hartung cut in. "Remember what you agreed."

Evvie said no more but she looked like a balloon about to swell and burst.

Dr. Hartung, a slight, balding man who looked as though the long years of study and training for his profession weighed heavily on him, pushed back the sleeve of his expensive plasti-silk suit and glanced at the gold wafer of a chronometer on his thin, hairy wrist.

"It's after 1500 hours, Mr. Prentiss. You were due at my office an hour ago. When you didn't show, I phoned your home and your wife and I had a little talk and we decided that it might be best if I ran out here to see you."

George squeezed water from his arms. He shook his head. "That's amazing. I've been out there al-

most seven hours. It didn't seem like more than two or three." He grinned at them. "Well, you know how it is when you're having a good time."

"That's what you were doing?" Dr. Hartung said.

"The best."

"With this — ah — underwater nymph you've been telling me about?"

"Yes," he said definitely. He looked triumphantly at his wife. "*There* you are, Evvie. There's grounds for divorce for you. I've known for a year or so that you've been dying to have some and, as you know, I've carefully avoided giving you any, because I could see no advantage to myself in having you leave me. Now, I no longer care. Of course, you'll probably have trouble convincing any judge that I really am having an affair with another woman, underwater, in the Sea of Serenity, but I suspect that my even persisting in such a notion could come under the heading of mental cruelty. So there you are. Help yourself."

"Oh, sure, you rat!" She practically screamed it. "And have your battery of expensive lawyers fight me all the way down the line and cut me off with a measly thousand credits a month. Like hell, George Prentiss!"

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Dr. Hartung threw up his hands. "Please! Both of you! No more of this . . . Please, Mrs. Prentiss, will you let me do the talking?" He turned back to George. "Let's be calm about this and discuss it like —" He broke off and George knew that he had been about to say 'like sane people.' He finished, lamely: "— well, calmly and quietly. May we?"

"Sure," George told him. "Shoot."

"The other day, when you phoned me," Dr. Hartung said, "I thought that perhaps you might have been trying to kid me, were, perhaps, testing me in some way. But you weren't, were you? You're quite serious about this — ah — young lady out there in the water? I mean, seeing her."

"Oh, quite."

"All right. Let's say that I believe you; admit that there is such a girl. What is it about her that so fascinates you? What I mean is, what about her is so different to your wife?"

"*That* would take me all day to tell you, Doc."

"Well, let's say, then," Hartung said, hastily. "Different from other women?"

"To start off, let's say that she seems to have all of the laudable, loveable human traits and few, if

any, of the deplorable, undesirable ones."

"Mmmmm-hmmm. Then, wouldn't you, being an intelligent, reasoning man, Mr. Prentiss, consider that an indication that maybe she is just a little — uh — too good to be true; that because of this perfection, by your own analysis, it would be almost impossible for her to be real, to be human?"

"Sure. I never said she was human. In fact, her body chemistry is probably much different from us Earthlings, since she can live underwater and is invisible out of water! But look at it this way, Hartung. When I'm with her, I'm happy, completely, roundly, wonderfully happy, at peace, comfortable, totally undisturbed about anything, soothed — and I could go on forever. Now, just because the circumstances surrounding the person who puts me in this state are unbelievable to others, does that mean I should deliberately negate the situation, turn my back on this wonderful creature?"

"We're getting a little involved, there," Hartung said, unhappily. "There's not too much point, getting involved with logic and philosophy and metaphysics. I don't deny that *you* believe you are experiencing this thing, remember. No more than I would disbelieve

your telling me in detail about a dream or a nightmare. The difference is in the recognition of what the experience actually is, you see. If you told me the details of a wild dream or a nightmare and were convinced that it actually happened, it would be my duty to try and dissuade you."

"Oh, hell. We seem to be going in circles. Not getting anywhere."

"Perhaps this will get us somewhere. Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Prentiss?"

"Not particularly."

"What about life after death, in any form?"

"I have never been really convinced of that," George said. "What are you getting at?"

"Did you ever hear the local legend about the beautiful young girl, who was swimming in this area, one night, about twenty years ago and disappeared?"

"What? I certainly haven't. Sounds fascinating, though."

"The story is that when Earth started colonizing Aldebaran III, a group of women from the local settlement came out here—in this general beach area, which was not built up at that time—held a beach party and went swimming in the raw. You know, a moonlight swim? There is no undertow and little surf—which is how the Sea of

Serenity got its name, as you know. Anyhow, this certain young lady—I forget her name—was seen, with the group, was remembered being with them. Then, when they were all ready to go home, nobody could find her. She'd disappeared. As time went by and she still didn't show up, there was much hue and cry, many theories about her vanishing. The water in the area was dragged. Searching parties went all through this section, combing every inch of the land around here. She was never found. There was no trace of what had happened to her . . . Oh, yes, the night of the disappearance, the girls with her, found her clothes, where she had disrobed."

George Prentiss pushed out his lower lip, when Hartung finished the story. He nodded his head, thoughtfully. "You have the theory that I'd heard about this yarn, Doc, forgotten about it, pushed it back into my subconscious and now it's broken through again in the form of an hallucination? You think this is the same girl?"

"Well, it's a possible explanation."

"But not a very probable one. I'm certain if I'd ever heard that local legend, I *would* remember it, Doc. But, look, if we must discuss the thing more, you'll have to

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come on up to the house with me. I imagine the engineer's laboring crew are already at work on the new pool."

That brought a wail of anguish from Evvie. "That's another thing, doctor. You see, he *does* know about it; George did order work started on a new swimming pool! If that doesn't prove he's flipping his lid, I don't know what does. We need another pool, like we need another left foot. You've got to stop all this, some way."

"Now, now, Mrs. Prentiss. You promised to remain calm. I'm sure there's a good explanation of that, isn't there, Mr. Prentiss?"

"Yup. I need another pool. A salt water pool. That's the explanation. Since I'm the one who has to pay for it, that seems to be a sufficient one for me. And as I said, I'll have to leave you, now, and go see how the work is progressing."

It was progressing swiftly. The ditch to lay the pipe which would carry fresh sea water to the pool had already been dug and some of the pipe laid. George Prentiss was much pleased.

Back at the house, George overheard his wife and Dr. Hartung, talking. Hartung was saying: "Try to keep in mind, my dear, that this particular obsession of your

husband's isn't really hurting anyone — certainly not him. If anything, it seems to be doing him a lot of good. In the week since I last saw him, he seems to look several years younger. His eyes are brighter, his stride springier and I believe he's lost a little weight in the right places, firmed up some. Of course that could all be due to the constant water exercise. What I'm getting at, is this: if this is just a temporary thing, some sort of escape or release from temporary pressures, and not a symptom of something more serious, everything will be all right. He'll get tired of the fantasy, gradually and then soon will forget all about it. Meanwhile, all we can do is wait and watch for any possible signs of something more serious, more dangerous."

"Look, Harvey," Evvie said, exasperated, "I know George better than you. He's always been a passive, dull stupid bore — which was just the way I liked him. I tell you he's not capable of this kind of imaginative escapade unless he's cracked up, altogether. I think that's what's happened. If so, I'm not going to wait much longer. If there's many more signs, I'll have the bastard committed!"

George whistled under his

breath. He told himself: "I'll be damned! She would, too, the little witch! I'd better watch myself from now on. In fact I'd better do a fast retreat."

He galloped down the rest of the stairs then and into the drawing room where his wife and Dr. Hartung stared at his sudden entrance with slightly guilty surprise.

George came looping and spinning into the room, flailing his right arm, an idiotic expression on his face. He shouted: "Ole! Watch the way I handle this *cesta* — side wall shots and everything! Ole for *Jorge Prentissta*. The great! *Jai Alai*, any one?"

Then he stopped and broke out laughing at their dismayed expressions. "Okay, okay," he said. "That was just the grand finale, the finishing touch. I'm calling the whole thing quits. Of course, there isn't any underwater maiden. The whole thing is just a mad, practical joke. I was pulling your leg, doc, just having some fun, as you suspected. But it's all over now, so let's forget it, huh?"

Both of them looked dubious. Evvie snapped: "Don't believe him, doctor. He's just being crafty, now, trying to throw us off the scent."

"That's flattering but untrue,"

George told her. "I'm incapable of being crafty."

"Yeah, then how about the new salt water pool? Is that part of your so-called farce?"

"No," George said. "Absolutely not. That is a very real, very solid project and very healthful for swimming in. Thanks for reminding me, darling. I'd better go see how it's coming along."

The new pool, with its natural sand bottom and its tricky drainage and replacement system of water pumped in from the sea, was completed in a little over two days, costing George nearly five thousand credits, in addition to the exorbitant basic fee for the job, which bothered him not at all. In fact he was so delighted with the rapid completion of the job, that the presentation of the final check was almost a pleasure.

During those two days, he continued to spend much of his time in the sea with the girl, of course. They discussed at some length the problem of how to transport her to the pool. The only possible solution to that problem that he could think of frightened her considerably. He finally convinced her that it would be all right, only with the promise that he would accompany her every inch of the way.

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So it was, that two days later, the bemused and bewildered crew of a hired dredging barge, lowered a huge plasti-metal vat containing George Prentiss wearing underwater breathing equipment, by means of block and tackle, into the waters of the sea, three or four hundred yards off his private beach, at a spot pre-arranged between him and the girl. Under the water, George helped the girl climb into the vat with him and then at his signal, the vat was raised again, brimming with water that completely covered them, and set on the deck of the barge. The vat was then brought by the barge to a makeshift dock and transferred to a truck that carried it along a crude road to the site of George's new swimming pool. There, the vat, still complete with George, the girl and the sea water, was lowered in its entirety into the pool, wherein George and the girl climbed out of it and the operation was complete.

There remained for George to have a high wall built around the new pool. Even though he knew that they couldn't see the girl, but only himself, still George did not like the idea of Evvie and her friends, and the servants, spying on him, while he frolicked in the pool with his beloved.

The girl, of course, took well to her new home and she and George were blissfully happy, in the days that followed. In that period, George continued to show signs of getting younger and healthier looking. His wife, Evvie, took the opposite route. She almost lost her appetite completely; she lost weight, became shrill and waspishly ill-tempered as she became more and more baffled and frustrated in her attempts to, as she put it, "*do something about George,*" to blast his newly acquired sense of happiness and well being, to reduce him again to the miserable existence with her that he had so long endured, before.

During that time, although Evvie insisted that he continued to be obsessed with the hallucination about the girl and even went so far as to think, now, that he had her in the new pool with him, George demurred, stuck to his guns that he'd only been kidding and that the gag was now completely over. He claimed that he just had taken a notion to have a private pool of his own; that he preferred enjoying the water by himself.

Finally, Evvie was forced to abandon her objective of having George committed. Dr. Hartung, finally throwing up his hands of

the whole affair, told her: "My dear woman, I'm afraid there is little chance of your being able to do that. Since your husband acts sane and rational in every other respect, could not in any way be classed as dangerous, there is nothing you can do. Certainly some of his actions and notions can be classed as eccentric, but they are harmless eccentricities. And millionaires, as I'm sure you know, are quite commonly known to be eccentric. I'm afraid, my good woman, that just because you allow his little foibles to drive you to distraction, is your fault, not his."

"But — but, he's so damned *smugly* happy," she complained, weeping. "And so impervious to any of my attempts to jar him out of it."

"Hmmmm," said Dr. Hartung, eyeing her narrowly, and let it go at that.

This state of affairs, with George Prentiss blissfully spending most of the twenty four hours he was not sleeping, every day, in his private pool, continued for another week or so. Then, one night, Evvie appeared at the doorway of his bedroom.

"Well, this is goodbye, George. I've had it. I'm leaving in the morning for Earth, to obtain a

divorce."

Despite her worn, thinned-out appearance, George detected a triumphant gleam in Evvie's eyes which worried him. He tried to dispel it.

"Great," he said. "I'll call my lawyers about it, in the morning. As you must know, they'll see to it that you are given a comfortable, adequate settlement. But I hope you also understand that you won't be allowed to hit me too heavily, to bleed me the way you'd probably like to."

"Of course," she said, quite meekly. "I understand." But the triumphant gleam in her eye did not dim. It seemed to burn more brightly.

Long after she left his room, this worried George and puzzled him, but after awhile he pushed it out of his mind and went to sleep.

The next morning, wearing his bathing shorts and carrying his underwater equipment, George was about to go out to the pool, when he was confronted by Evvie, wearing a trim and expensive traveling suit and the same nasty, glittering gleam of evil triumph in her eyes.

"George, before I go, I want to ask you one last thing," she said.

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"All right."

"Do you still insist that you no longer believe in that girl? You don't think you have her there with you, all the time, in the salt water private pool?"

He opened his eyes wide, feigned surprise. "What girl, Evvie?"

"Okay," she said. "You're sure, now? Positive that girl doesn't live in your pool?"

"Oh, of course not. Come on, Evvie," he said, but a big, vague fear was welling up in him. "What's this all about?"

"Just come with me," she told him.

He followed her outside and the fear grew in him, as she led the way toward the walled, private pool. Especially, when he saw that the heavily barred and always locked gate was now open.

"I snatched your keys and had a duplicate made," she explained.

Then they were inside the pool area and George stood near the edge of the pool and stared down in horrified disbelief, at the now dry, sandy bottom of the empty pool. At one end, near the drain at the bottom, sand was swirled up against the filter and there was a small puddle of water. There was no other water in the pool.

George stood there, numbed, sick, speechless. As though from

some great distance, he heard Evvie say: "I drained it, George. And I stood here and watched every minute, last night, while the water ran out. The water grew more and more shallow, George, but there was no sign of her. You see? I did that because I felt it was my duty, before I left, just in case you had any doubts left, to prove that there really *wasn't* any such girl, George. Do you see?" She spoke with the vicious delight of an older youngster telling a three year old, on Christmas Eve, that there was no Santa Claus, and proving it to him.

Finally George found his voice. He whispered: "But it's impossible. What — what happened to her? Where did she go?"

"To Never-Never-Land, Georgie, dear, where she came from."

He turned, slowly and looked at her, only total empty, blank dismay and unbearable hurt in his eyes. "You didn't see, hear any sign of her? She — she didn't try to escape?"

"Well," Evvie said. "If I were as highly imaginative as you, I *might* have thought that as the final pools of water gurgled down that drain that the sound of them doing that could have sounded like the weak groans and protests of a human being. Fortunately,

though, I was spared that illusion."

He turned back to look down into the pool. "Gone," he said, softly. "She's gone. I've lost her."

"Goodbye, George," Evvie told him. "Have a good time, now. Enjoy yourself. Be happy and contented, George." And then she was gone.

For a long, long time, George remained standing there by the edge of the empty pool. Finally, though, he turned and walked, stoop-shouldered, looking like a lonely, broken, dejected old man, back to the house. All that day, he wandered from room to room of the huge mansion. He tried to get drunk. He drank a full fifth of Earth Scotch but it seemed to have no effect on him at all.

That night, he wandered down to the beach. He stood for a long time on the silent beach, staring out at the sea, watching the vast glasslike surface of green. Then, he slowly started walking down toward the far end of the beach. Halfway there, he saw, lying curled gracefully, the naked figure of a young woman, her long, soft dark hair curling about her back. He recognized her instantly and began to run, stumbling and staggering, toward her, a terrible crying beginning to rip from his chest.

But just as he reached her, the slim figure on the sand stirred. Irlana sat up and twisted around and looked at him and uncertainty and bewilderment clouded her eyes.

He stood, looking down at her, stupefied, watching her gracefully arise. "Hello, George," she said. "You look good with your clothes on, too." She reached out her arms to him.

He saw she'd been crying. Her lashed were still brimmed with moisture. "Are — are you real?"

She nodded slowly, then turned her head away. "Yes, I'm real, George. Very real."

"But you're on dry land — and alive. And we're talking to each other, not just thinking words. And you're visible." His head ached with all the thoughts crowding one upon the other.

"I — I'm afraid I lied to you, George," she said slowly. "I'm not a native of Paradise Planet. I just told you that to intrigue you. And I can live outside of water, too. I wanted to see if you cared enough to really worry about whether or not I died when your wife drained the pool."

"Care about you?" George took her into his arms. "Irlana darling, I was worried sick. But why — "

"I was going to leave on the

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same rocket that took your wife to Earth today. I was so ashamed about tricking you. It wasn't fair. But I couldn't leave. I love you, I really do."

"But . . ."

She sighed. "I'm afraid I'm just a poor working girl from Venus, here on vacation. As you know, on Venus, we're amphibious, and we are pretty well advanced in mental telepathy."

"That explains the underwater bit and the thought-communication," George said, "but what about the invisibility?"

"Hypnotism," she said. "Look, I'm sorry. At first, I just intended to play a gag on you because I thought you were a rich old stuffed shirt with your private beach and

all, but . . ."

"Yes?" George prompted.

"Well, I grew to like you. And then I fell for you." She hesitated. "I won't be angry if you tell me to leave."

"Tell you to leave?" George said, hugging her. "After all the trouble I went through to get you? Besides if you can read minds, you should know what I'm thinking."

She nodded, snuggling happily to him.

Overhead, a rocket thundered through the yellow clouds, carrying Evvie back to Earth. Together, Irlana and George Prentiss looked upward at the sound.

Then together, arms linked, they walked back along the beach toward the house.

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IF YOU MISSED OUT ON GAMMA 1 OR GAMMA 2, don't despair. There are still back copies available of this collector's item, which contains stories by Tennessee Williams, Ray Bradbury, Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, etc. Order directly from the publisher, enclosing fifty cents for each issue.



MERTHINHAM

Shelly Lowenkopf decided in college that he wanted to live the life of a Renaissance man and be a generalist instead of the run-of-the-IBM card man who merely collects stamps or raises hunting dogs. At current writing he contributes a regular column to a Virginia City newspaper, following in the illustrious steps of Mark Twain; he cultivates and grows wine grapes and produces his own wine; he collects old ghost towns of the West by regularly visiting off-trail areas where tourists seldom go and he assiduously buys every volume on lore of the old West that he can find. He is an aficionado of jazz, weird Indian dolls, bullfighting and paintings. In his spare time, since his graduation from UCLA, he has also authored 40 novels under 9 pseudonyms and is presently associate editor of the newest mystery and suspense magazine, CHASE. He also finds time, incredibly enough, to serve as secretary-treasurer of the Southern California chapter of the Mystery Writers of America. When he gets bored with life in Los Angeles he moves around California with a traveling circus and acts as their number one barker. In the following story, he presents a disconcerting picture of the world of the near future.

THE FEATHER BED

Shelly Lowenkopf

Whenever Lew came home from work in a surly mood, his wife immediately indulged her belief that it was best to consolidate his irritations into one big, easy to pay tantrum. If this strategy failed to solve the problem at hand, it at least made for a more receptive husband by the time dinner was on the table.

It was, therefore, with studied innocence that Meg asked him

"How was work today?" immediately after Lew slammed into the house, moved defiantly into the living room and swept two copies of the current *New Yorker* off the coffee table with an angry thrust of his attache case.

"Lousy," Lew said, "just lousy. I have done something a few minutes ago that will have over five thousand people at each other's throats within days. We'll un-

doubtedly get threatening phone calls, be picketed and receive suspicious looking packages in the mail. After the publicity, you'll be lucky to escape stoning at the supermarket."

Meg swallowed a pang of worry and tried to continue sounding non-committal. "I take it something went wrong today."

"Right," Lew said heavily. "Absolutely right. I wrote the first two acts of *King Lear* today. They want the rest by Friday night."

"That sounds easy enough," Meg said.

"Right again. Too easy. I refused to do it. I can't do it. I just can't do it again. It's too damned frustrating."

Meg groaned. "That's going to mean a strike."

"A big one," Lew agreed, "Probably nationwide. Harvey Wynant, the union steward, drew a vivid picture of what would happen if I refused to finish *Lear*. The last edition is due to be destroyed Monday. The timing on *Lear* was supposed to coincide with two big Shakespeare Festivals to create a demand for my edition. My refusing means being sent to Coventry. The union will be forced to expel me on the grounds that refusing to write Shakespeare is a dangerous precedent. You can guess the

rest. I'll be barred from ninety-five percent of all American publications. Foreign publishing is fine, but no sales or reviews here. If we try to live that way, every writer, artist and professional entertainer will regard us as scabs."

"Then why," Meg said, "can't you simply finish *King Lear*? You got such lovely reviews the last time you wrote it."

Lew tugged at a stubborn necktie and sank defiantly into the sofa. "Those were nothing — not compared to the jacket blurbs they've planned for this one. You know what they're going to say? 'A fine young writer fulfills his early promise evidenced in *Madame Bovary* by coming to grips with the father-daughter relationship in a no-holds barred rendition of Shakespeare's famous drama.' And that is part of the reason I simply cannot write *King Lear* again. I have no desire to become a martyr. I like living as comfortably as we live, but it's getting to the point where I'm too frustrated to enjoy it. I can't enjoy anything. It's this damned point system and the periodic destruction of books that's behind it."

Meg reached for the martini pitcher, which was generally her strongest gambit in less intense crises. Lew tasted his cocktail and

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gave the first pleasant reaction of the evening — an appreciative crinkling of his long, oval face — over the favorable gin-vermouth ratio. "What it boils down to is this. I'm going to catch hell for not doing something nobody else wants to do either."

"I guess," Meg said with a sigh, "there'll be a big showdown."

"Most likely tomorrow."

"Before you do any drastic bridge burning, Lew, will you do me one favor? There's a lot at stake."

"What's the favor?" Lew asked suspiciously.

"Will you try — just try — to listen to some reason?"

"Sure," Lew said. "I'll be glad to. I'll be very happy to listen to some reason. There's just one problem. There isn't any. I can't for the life of me see reason in any of it."

"That's a pretty shoddy attitude, Lew." Harvey Wynant, the union steward for Lew's publisher, sat nervously on the edge of Lew's desk, lacing and unlacing his pudgy fingers. A grizzled, alcoholic writer of Westerns, Wynant sternly wrinkled his vein splotched face, making it look like a roadmap. "The union's been good to you."

"Has it?" Lew said bitterly. "The publishers all pushed the idea that we form a union so they could

have someone to bargain with. Big democratic deal. Equal rights for all sides. Lots of protection. Now we're so damned protected that we can't even work."

"It's been a good system, Lew."

"Good, hell! There isn't any reason for my writing *King Lear*, and you know it. It's been written, and rather nicely at that."

Wynant grew fatherly. "You don't understand the economics of it. I didn't either until I became union steward. We have to stimulate the economy and provide more jobs. Next Monday, the license on the last edition of *King Lear* expires, right? So we make it mandatory to destroy every copy in existence. Right away, you've got a job writing it. Proof readers, secretaries and printers are put to work on the new edition. Book salesmen have a ready-made market. Book stores get new customers. Artists get to design jacket covers and do illustrations. Hundreds of highly trained people have jobs they wouldn't ordinarily have."

"Two years ago," Lew said evenly, "a professor in Berkeley was given a fine and a jail sentence for being discovered with an original copy of a Shakespeare play. What kind of good system is it that makes a criminal of a college professor?"

"The law of the land is made to protect the land."

"I feel," Lew said, "like hitting someone."

"I've fixed everything for you," Wynant said in a conciliatory tone. "Your editor thinks you're having trouble with the blank verse and Elizabethian idiom. He thinks you are having a spell of nerves over the deadline."

"He knows damned well I'm fed up with being a secretary," Lew insisted. "He's just as worried about a strike as you are."

"Look, Lew Baby," Wynant said, digging into his jacket pocket. "I've got special benefits for you." He drew forth a string of perforated yellow chits. "You're on a deadline, right? You've got to have *Lear* done by Friday so the printers can work all weekend and get in the overtime due them. Well, special deadline means special privileges. Here, take these. They're good for free rubdowns in the gym and gratis meals in the cafeteria."

"The food there is lousy."

"Shhh," Wynant said. "They think they're pretty good."

"The rubdown sounds okay. What's for lunch?"

"Stuffed peppers."

"I think I'll go out."

"Lew, you can't!" Wynant said

forcefully. "We've got to take all the employee benefits they give us."

"Including the crap?"

Wynant stood abruptly. "Okay, you want to make a big play. Well, you're not going to screw things up for the rest of us, you hear?"

"Do you really mean it, Harve? Do you really want things this way?"

"They're better than no way at all. You're young yet. Wait til you've got more mileage on you. Then you'll see. Every word you write is like a tooth yanked without novocaine."

"Funny," Lew said, "I feel that way right now."

"Is that your answer?"

Lew nodded with emphasis.

"Okay, as union steward, I'm warning you. Unless you change your mind before Friday's deadline, you'll be placed on suspension, subject to courtmarshall and permanent blackball without recourse. I sort of hope you do decide to defect. We can use a good example for the rest of the membership."

Lew stood, a gesture intimidating to Wynant, who was nearly six inches shorter. "You'd better go, Harve," he said. "All morning I've had this ardent desire to poke

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someone. It could easily be you."

During the hour of his rub-down, Lew tried to think relaxing, reasonable thoughts. As the masseur's hands kneaded at his neck and shoulders, Lew became obsessed with the notion of reason. He did not want to be a martyr, he really didn't. But neither did he wish to be a glorified secretary or a slave to a point system or even a man who had to buy two copies of every magazine he read, simply because married people were expected to consume more. It really didn't make sense to destroy perfectly good work just to create more jobs. "There is no reason whatsoever . . . not in any of it," he told the masseur.

Trying to think loyal thoughts, he cancelled an outside lunch date and decided to be as reasonable as he'd promised Meg. This meant stuffed peppers in the employee's cafeteria. Gift of management, Employee benefits.

The employee benefits gave Lew gas pains. He was just in the act of muffling a belch when Donaldson, his chief editor, knocked ceremoniously at Lew's office and entered.

Donaldson was a peppery, punctilious man whose kinky grey hair gave the impression he stuffed a washboard in his pillow. "How's

old Lear coming?" he said cautiously.

"In plenty *tsouris* with his daughters."

"You will be finished by Friday, won't you, Lew?"

Lew felt his stomach rumble over his employee benefits. There was a long moment in which he tried to think reasonably. "No," he said, "I'm afraid not." He pointed to a large chart hung on the wall, directly over a book case filled with his current original and copied works. The chart showed an agonizing quota schedule. The points he'd earn from *Lear* would scarcely make a dent in his requirements. A quick calculation told him it would be six months before he could turn to anything original. "I just can't see doing it."

"That isn't very realistic thinking," Donaldson said with a patronizing air. "You're being argumentative."

"Damned right. Argumentative and arbitrary. I've been looking at that damned chart and thinking. The last two books I wrote sold well enough to make you some money and me trouble. This is a case of a man being penalized for being successful. I won't get to anything original for months, and there's a novel I'd like to try."

"We're only too happy to discuss

it with you. You know that. We do all we can and more. Employee benefits. A twenty-eight year copyright, renewable for another twenty-eight years, based on the old concept of copyright. While an author lives, his original works don't apply to the licensing law. Your books won't be destroyed while you're alive."

"Damned reasonable," Lew said acidly. "I've spent nearly fifteen years developing a reasonable, professional competance. There are very few other jobs I could perform. For that, I get the dubious pleasure of being forced by law to devote nearly three-fourths of my time to doing work that doesn't have to be done in the first place."

Donaldson inspected his cuffs. "Perhaps we can give you a contract guaranteeing to assign you the writing of a book you've never read before. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No," Lew said. "I wouldn't like it. You'll have to get someone else to finish *King Lear*. I absolutely will not do it."

"Perhaps there's another solution."

Lew's hope took a sharp rise. Management always had a few last ditch concessions up its sleeve. "I have promised to listen to rea-

son," he said, expectantly.

Donaldson sat carefully, alert for any dangers to the crease of his grey tweeds. "We could put another writer on *King Lear* and give you a leave of absence."

"What's the hitch?"

"There is no hitch. It would be a sick leave. Naturally, the company would help defray the cost of a psychiatrist."

"That's out," Lew snapped. "The only emotional difficulties I'm having are clearly defined. I need no help in recognizing them."

"If I were you, Lew, I'd think seriously about this final offer. It's the rational way out."

Lew shook his head and took a step toward his editor. "No," he said, "I'll show you a rational way out." He smiled briefly, then delivered a sharp jab to Donaldson's stomach. The editor sank to the floor with the noise of a leaky balloon.

"I guess," Lew said, "that I'm fired."

Donaldson sputtered a moment for his breath. "Not fired," he said, "through. Finished. Your career has less chance than a used book of crossword puzzles in a second-hand store."

During the next two days, Lew discovered that his portrait of doom had been conservative. Sev-

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eral close friends who were writers, artists and entertainers angrily informed him that he had betrayed them, himself and Something Bigger. When Lew pressed for a description of the something bigger, they lost their tempers and told him if he didn't know by now, damnit, then there was no help for him.

A telegram from the union informed Lew of his suspension. "And I have been snubbed several times by the neighbors at the market," Meg said. "Not only that, a TV camera crew left tire marks on the lawn, we've had crank telephone calls and the butcher who saves scraps for the cat won't wait on me anymore. He's afraid you're going to be responsible for having his favorite TV program cancelled."

"I have nothing to do with TV ratings."

"Nor with making a living," Meg reminded.

To save face, the Writer's Union openly denounced Lew in TV spots and news releases, then took out full page ads on Americanism in the morning *Times* and the evening *Herald-Examiner*.

The following day, Lew read a disturbing account in the Western edition of the *New York Times*. The National Association of Pub-

lishers, in a move equally designed to save face and show the power of management, initiated a token-lock-out of all publishing facilities in New York and Los Angeles.

Shortly after midnight of the first day of lockout, Lew received a deputation at his back door. Charlie Parcells, a pudgy man who wrote spy thrillers when he wasn't rewriting the works of Dickens, darted in first, a hat pulled low on his broad brow. He seemed relieved not to have been followed. With him was nervous, furtive, cigar smoking Lon Rawlins, who wrote articles for *Time Magazine* and did sport stories when he wasn't writing Zane Grey.

Meg served coffee while Charlie Parcells darted about, drawing various blinds and drapes. At length, Lew got them into his work room and heard them out.

"All I have to offer is mutual starvation," Lew said when they finished. "I don't see how the three of us can do anything. I appreciate the fact that you're sympathetic and with me in principle, but there's no way to upset the system. Our hands are tied."

"We could have a revolution," Rawlins said.

"More on the order of a mutiny," Parcells said. "Like *Mutiny on the Bounty*."

"The only trouble," Lew reminded them, "is that we have no Bounty. We have nothing, absolutely nothing."

"This lock-out swings sentiment in your favor," Parcells said.

"Sure," Lew snapped. "My picture and a shot of my home are shown regularly on TV. I'm the man who sabotaged the system."

"Popular sentiment is a precarious thing, you know that," Rawlins insisted. "The rumor is that the executive committee of the union can't get enough votes to kick you out. There's even talk of commending you for punching Donaldson."

Lew accepted a cigar from Rawlins. "I don't see how I can possibly help," he said. "As it is, I'm faced with the choice of leaving the country or finding a new job."

Charlie Parcells hooted. "You're trained to be a writer. What else could you do?"

"I'll have to find something," Lew said. "There must be some position where I can get on-the-job training, tearing down things that didn't have to be built in the first place."

The two writers left through the back door at five minute intervals after checking all the windows. The moment Parcells, the last, was

gone, Meg poured more coffee. "I hate to be a nag," she said, "but you do have some responsibility."

"Nuts," Lew said.

"You really do. Any time you take a stand, you've got to take the responsibility that goes with it."

"Nuts," Lew said. "Now, I'm in a revolution." He moved toward the back door to call after Parcells. He arrived just in time to see two men in dark overcoats forcibly helping the writer into a nondescript black sedan. The tail lights of another car flickered down the alleyway. Lew was positive Rawlins was captive in the first car. "Union goons," he said. "They've got the boys."

Meg stood at his side. "Maybe they're hired muscle from management."

"Neither," a voice said in the shadows of the yard. A pair of tall, menacing men in dark overcoats stepped into the halo of light from the porch, presenting their credentials. "FBI," they said in unison.

"I don't want to be a martyr," Lew told them.

"Then get your coat and come with us."

They questioned Lew for nearly three and a half hours, using

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standard police procedure. This meant one of the FBI agents appeared to be openly hostile and skeptical of everything Lew told them. The other appeared to be friendly and sincere, ready to intercede on Lew's behalf at the slightest sign of infraction.

Sitting quietly in a corner, taking notes and peering at him critically was a waspish man who was introduced as a psychiatrist.

"What I want to know," Lew said, "is how the FBI has jurisdiction in this matter?"

"Just what matter do you think this is?" the skeptical FBI agent asked.

"Don't get him confused," the friendly agent said. "Anything you want to tell us, Lew. Anything at all. We're with you."

"I want to be able to work," Lew said. "That's really all there is to it."

"He's either a Socialist or he's after our jobs," the hostile FBI agent said.

"Ease up on him," the friendly agent said. "He's got a right to his opinions. Now come on, Lew, tell us something."

When Lew was released the next morning, the *Times* was on the streets with a story showing the basis for FBI jurisdiction. The National Association of Publishers'

lock-out interfered with a rush job on the Declaration of Independence. It was clearly a Federal matter. It was so clearly Federal that a States Rights Senator from the South used his seniority to have himself appointed head of a Special Senate Investigating Committee to meet in Los Angeles.

"Why are you here?" the Senator asked Lew when the Committee convened at the Sports Arena.

"I was summoned," Lew said.

The Senator shook his shaggy head impatiently.

"I'm here," Lew said, "because I refused to write *King Lear* again and because I punched Donaldson in the stomach."

The Senator consulted an impressive looking report. His voice rang with grave overtones. "The FBI psychiatric consultant says your assault on Donaldson was an attempt to do something rational. Explain."

"Having to buy two copies of the same magazine is irrational," Lew said. "Having to destroy perfectly good work so that it can be redone is irrational. Everything we do is deliberately planned to become obsolete when the license expires. There is no incentive left. There is no illusion. Without illusion, we are dead. It is that simple. All my illusions were gone. I

couldn't work. I couldn't even do a good job on *King Lear*. I could not continue with such an untenable system."

"What," the Senator asked, "do you have against Democracy?"

"Don't answer that!" an outraged voice shouted.

"And who the hell, sir, are you?" the Senator demanded.

"I'm an attorney from the American Civil Liberties Union."

The Senator groaned and the committee went into closed session. After two hours debate, Lew was called into the chamber to be asked one question. "If you were given re-instatement in your union and assured of no penalties, would you complete *King Lear* as per your contractual agreement?"

"No."

The Senator groaned and ordered a recess for dinner.

The Committee sat for another week, questioning Charlie Parcells, Lon Rawlins and fourteen other writers. At this point, the meeting was opened to the public again. The Senator seemed greyer and even more staunchly States Rights. After some brief opening remarks, he addressed himself to Lew. "You stood a very strong chance of becoming a martyr."

Lew shook his head.

"It may come as a surprise," the

Senator continued, "but this Committee has weighed the facts and acted on them. We have implemented a solution. The lock-out is officially over. If the writers will go back to their work . . . if *King Lear* is finished . . . there will be equity for all under the law. Henceforth, writers will be less strictly bound by the point system. A new government agency has been created, providing even more specialized jobs. There will be virtually no limit on the amount of original work a writer may do."

This announcement occasioned a spontaneous round of applause and demonstration. The Senator waited it out. "The government wants all you writers here and in New York to get back to work. On your free time, you may submit originals directly to the new governmental agency. Submit fifty pages and an outline. If we don't like the work, our government editors will make suggestions for revisions." He nodded affably at Lew. "Congratulations, gentlemen, you've given several thousand people new jobs."

Lew was on his feet before the new outburst was quieted down. "Surely, Senator, you don't mean the government is going into the commercial publishing business. That would be competing with

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private industry. It would be Socialism."

The Senator's nose wrinkled at the mention of the word. "Publication? I'm afraid you've misunderstood. I've said nothing about publication. The government is opening this new department to see that you do your best work. You'll be well paid for it."

"But how can you pay us if we're not published and distributed?" Lew demanded.

"Very easily," the Senator said with a smile. "The taxes from the salaries of the newly created jobs will take care of the cost. As to your work, it will be carefully microfilmed and placed in a vault in the Library of Congress."

"Then there's no solution after all," Lew protested.

The Senator was irked. "You wanted incentive to do original work. Now you have it. When you fulfill your point system obligations, your private publishers may distribute your commercial originals. The Government is merely making arrangements to absorb the surplus. A neat arrangement, you must admit."

"Nuts," Lew said. "I'd rather find myself another job!" He stormed out of the Sports Arena.

"I think," the Senator said when Lew was gone, "that Mr. Wynant

was right. We need to make an example of someone. I'm going to see to it that whenever that brash young man submits original manuscripts to the Government Writer's Surplus Program, every other manuscript will be rejected. That should teach him something."

* * *

It was with studied innocence that Meg asked him, "How was work today?" immediately after Lew slammed into the house, moved defiantly into the living room and swept two copies of the current *New Yorker* off the coffee table with an angry rattle of his tool box.

"Lousy," Lew said, "just lousy. I quit. They had us tearing all the plumbing out of a three year old building, just so that we could start installing new pipes next week. There is no point to destroying perfectly good work for the sake of doing it over again."

Meg brought out the martini pitcher and poured. While Lew sipped, she brought out a small notebook and crossed off the word PLUMBER. "You'd better be careful," she said. "There aren't too many others left."

"What's the picture?" Lew asked.

"Well, there's carpentering, garage mechanic and teacher."

"I'm not really good with my hands," Lew said. "Maybe the teaching would work out. What else is there?"

"Trouble," Meg said. "Believe it or not, after teaching, you'll have made the complete circuit."

"What do you mean?" Lew said, taking the note book from her. "What's on the list of things I could be if teaching doesn't work out?"

"I'm afraid," Meg said, "that it's back to being a writer."

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About Our Interior Artist

The talented artist whose work we are proud to showcase in GAMMA 3 is young, blonde Luan Meatheringham who (although mysterious in the fascinating way that all women are mysterious) does not resemble the remarkable creatures that flow from her pen. In fact, she appears surprisingly normal. Los Angeles born, she has lived in Carmel and San Francisco, and now resides in a very modern swimming pool apartment in Westwood notably deficient in dark corridors, haunted rooms, and witches' broom closets.

She received her training at the San Francisco Art Institute and the San Francisco Academy of Art, after which she did television story boards. She became an art director for a large San Francisco advertising agency for two and a half years, then freelanced in television.

Her current activities involve freelance artistry in advertising and magazine illustration. In the works is a children's book she is writing and illustrating herself and which is scheduled for publication later this year.

Besides drawing the remarkable pen and ink sketches you'll find scattered among these pages, Luan has a passion for old movies, her fast MGA, and Japanese seaweed crackers.

"These aren't just stories," an excited reviewer said of Bernard Malamud's first story collection, *The Magic Barrel* which won the National Book Award in 1959. "They are rather actual lives . . . you tremble with first love, you are held fast by fear . . . this isn't just reading a book: you enter Malamud's world, you are there."

Malamud's world, the world of Angel Levine, the intense lovers of his novel *The Assistant*, the frustrated professor in *A New Life*, the passion-crazed American artist in Rome of *Still Life*, is an unreal world full of unresolved tensions, of gnawing wants, of lightning-like hates and loves whose people lead parched lives hunting desperately for a love that always seems to elude them. Although he is not known especially for his fantasies, in a sense all of his fiction is fantasy because his characters seem abnormally hungry, abnormally excited, abnormally tense — at times they seem like Dostoevski's characters to be visitors from another world who have stumbled on this planet and do not quite know how to cope with it.

Acclaimed internationally as one of the best writers in America, Bernard Malamud is a native of New York and attended the City College there. Besides writing, he has taught English at a small college on the Pacific Coast. His compelling style which buttonholes the reader as insistently as the Ancient Mariner seized the attention of the wedding guest in Coelridge's poem, is quickly revealed in *Angel Levine* which is printed here. This fantasy which the editors think is one of the author's best, shows vividly his compassion and his gifted imagination. Like all of Malamud's stories it is improbable, unpredictable and captivating.

ANGEL LEVINE

Bernard Malamud

Manischewitz, a tailor, in his fifty-first year suffered many reverses and indignities. Previously

a man of comfortable means, he overnight lost all he had, when his establishment caught fire and,

"Angel Levine" is reprinted from the book, THE MAGIC BARREL by Bernard Malamud, by special arrangement with the publisher, Farrar, Straus & Company, Inc. Copyright © 1955, 1958 by Bernard Malamud.

after a metal container of cleaning fluid exploded, burned to the ground. Although Manishevitz was insured against fire, damage suits by two customers who had been hurt in the flames deprived him of every penny he had collected. At almost the same time, his son, of much promise, was killed in the war, and his daughter, without so much as a word of warning, married a lout and disappeared with him as off the face of the earth. Thereafter Manishevitz was victimized by excruciating backaches and found himself unable to work even as a presser—the only kind of work available to him—for more than an hour or two daily, because beyond that the pain from standing became maddening. His Fanny, a good wife and mother, who had taken in washing and sewing, began before his eyes to waste away. Suffering shortness of breath, she at last became seriously ill and took to her bed. The doctor, a former customer of Manishevitz, who out of pity treated them, at first had difficulty diagnosing her ailment but later put it down as hardening of the arteries at an advanced stage. He took Manishevitz aside, prescribed complete rest for her, and in whispers gave him to know there was little

hope.

Throughout his trials Manishevitz had remained somewhat stoic, almost unbelieving that all this had descended upon his head, as if it were happening, let us say, to an acquaintance or some distant relative; it was in sheer quantity of woe incomprehensible. It was also ridiculous, unjust, and because he had always been a religious man, it was in a way an affront to God. Manishevitz believed this in all his suffering. When his burden had grown too crushingly heavy to be borne he prayed in his chair with shut hollow eyes: "My dear God, sweetheart did I deserve that this should happen to me?" Then recognizing the worthlessness of it, he put aside the complaint and prayed humbly for assistance: "Give Fanny back her health, and to me for myself that I shouldn't feel pain in every step. Help now or tomorrow is too late. This I don't have to tell you." And Manishevitz wept.

Manishevitz's flat, which he had moved into after the disastrous fire, was a meager one, furnished with a few sticks of chairs, a table, and bed, and in one of the poorer sections of the city. There were three rooms: a small, poorly-papered living room; an

apology for a kitchen, with a wooden icebox; and the comparatively large bedroom where Fanny lay in a sagging secondhand bed, gasping for breath. The bedroom was the warmest room of the house and it was here, after his outburst to God, that Manishevitz, by the light of two small bulbs overhead, sat reading his Jewish newspaper. He was not truly reading, because his thoughts were everywhere; however the print offered a convenient resting place for his eyes, and a word or two, when he permitted himself to comprehend them, had the momentary effect of helping him forget his troubles. After a short while he discovered, to his surprise, that he was actively scanning the news, searching for an item of great interest to him. Exactly what he thought he would read he couldn't say—until he realized, with some astonishment, that he was expecting to discover something about himself. Manishevitz put his paper down and looked up with the distinct impression that someone had entered the apartment, though he could not remember having heard the sound of the door opening. He looked around: the room was very still, Fanny sleeping, for once, quietly. Half-frightened, he

watched her until he was satisfied she wasn't dead; then, still disturbed by the thought of an unannounced visitor, he stumbled into the living room and there had the shock of his life, for at the table sat a Negro reading a newspaper he had folded up to fit into one hand.

"What do you want here?" Manishevitz asked in fright.

The Negro put down the paper and glanced up with a gentle expression. "Good evening." He seemed not to be sure of himself, as if he had got into the wrong house. He was a large man, bonily built, with a heavy head covered by a hard derby, which he made no attempt to remove. His eyes seemed sad, but his lips, above which he wore a slight mustache, sought to smile; he was not otherwise prepossessing. The cuffs of his sleeves, Manishevitz noted, were frayed to the lining and the dark suit was badly fitted. He had very large feet. Recovering from his fright, Manishevitz guessed he had left the door open and was being visited by a case worker from the Welfare Department—some came at night—for he had recently applied for relief. Therefore he lowered himself into a chair opposite the Negro, trying, before the man's uncertain smile,

to feel comfortable. The former tailor sat stiffly but patiently at the table, waiting for the investigator to take out his pad and pencil and begin asking questions; but before long he became convinced the man intended to do nothing of the sort.

"Who are you?" Manischewitz at last asked uneasily.

"If I may, insofar as one is able to, identify myself, I bear the name of Alexander Levine."

In spite of all his troubles Manischewitz felt a smile growing on his lips. "You said Levine?" he politely inquired.

The Negro nodded. "That is exactly right."

Carrying the jest farther, Manischewitz asked, "You are maybe Jewish?"

"All my life I was, willingly."

The tailor hesitated. He had heard of black Jews but had never met one. It gave an unusual sensation.

Recognizing in afterthought something odd about the tense of Levine's remark, he said doubtfully, "You ain't Jewish anymore?"

Levine at this point removed his hat, revealing a very white part in his black hair, but quickly replaced it. He replied, "I have recently been disincarnated into an angel. As such, I offer you

my humble assistance, if to offer is within my province and ability—in the best sense." He lowered his eyes in apology. "Which calls for added explanation: I am what I am granted to be, and at present the completion is in the future."

"What kind of angel is this?" Manischewitz gravely asked.

"A bona fide angel of God, within prescribed limitations," answered Levine, "not to be confused with the members of any particular sect, order, or organization here on earth operating under a similar name."

Manischewitz was thoroughly disturbed. He had been expecting something but not this. What sort of mockery was it—provided Levine was an angel—of a faithful servant who had from childhood lived in the synagogues, always concerned with the word of God?"

To test Levine he asked, "Then where are your wings?"

The Negro blushed as well as he was able. Manischewitz understood this from his changed expression. "Under certain circumstances we lose privileges and prerogatives upon returning to earth, no matter for what purpose, or endeavoring to assist whosoever."

"So tell me," Manischewitz said triumphantly, "how did you get

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here?"

"I was transmitted."

Still troubled, the tailor said, "If you are a Jew, say the blessing for bread."

Levine recited it in sonorous Hebrew.

Although moved by the familiar words Manishevitz still felt doubt that he was dealing with an angel.

"If you are an angel," he demanded somewhat angrily, "give me the proof."

Levine wet his lips. "Frankly, I cannot perform either miracles or near miracles, due to the fact that I am in a condition of probation. How long that will persist or even consist, I admit, depends on the outcome."

Manishevitz racked his brains for some means of causing Levine positively to reveal his true identity, when the Negro spoke again:

"It was given me to understand that both your wife and you require assistance of a salubrious nature?"

The tailor could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the butt of a jester. Is this what a Jewish angel looks like? he asked himself. This I am not convinced.

He asked a last question. "So if God sends to me an angel, why a black? Why not a white that

there are so many of them?"

"It was my turn to go next," Levine explained.

Manishevitz could not be persuaded. "I think you are a faker."

Levine slowly rose. His eyes showed disappointment and worry. "Mr. Manishevitz," he said tonelessly, "if you should desire me to be of assistance to you any time in the near future, or possibly before, I can be found"—he glanced at his fingernails—"in Harlem."

He was by then gone.

The next day Manishevitz felt some relief from his backache and was able to work four hours at pressing. The day after, he put in six hours; and the third day four again. Fanny sat up a little and asked for some halvah to suck. But on the fourth day the stabbing, breaking ache afflicted his back, and Fanny again lay supine, breathing with blue-lipped difficulty.

Manishevitz was profoundly disappointed at the return of his active pain and suffering. He had hoped for a longer interval of easement, long enough to have some thought other than of himself and his troubles. Day by day, hour by hour, minute after minute, he lived in pain, pain his only memory, questioning the necessity

of it, inveighing against it, also, though with affection, against God. Why *so much*, Gottenyu? If He wanted to teach His servant a lesson for some reason, some cause—the nature of His nature—to teach him, say, for reasons of his weakness, his pride, perhaps, during his years of prosperity, his frequent neglect of God—to give him a little lesson, why then any of the tragedies that had happened to him, any *one* would have sufficed to chasten him. But *all together*—the loss of both his children, his means of livelihood Fanny's health and his—that was too much to ask one frail-boned man to endure. Who, after all, was Manishevitz that he had been given so much to suffer? A tailor. Certainly not a man of talent. Upon his suffering was largely wasted. It went nowhere, into nothing: into more suffering. His pain did not earn him bread, nor fill the cracks in the wall, nor lift, in the middle of the night, the kitchen table; only lay upon him, sleepless, so sharply oppressively that he could many times have cried out yet not heard himself through this thickness of misery.

In this mood he gave no thought to Mr. Alexander Levine, but at moments when the pain wavered,

slightly diminishing, he sometimes wondered if he had been mistaken to dismiss him. A black Jew and angel to boot—very hard to believe, but suppose he *had* been sent to succor him, and he, Manishevitz, was in his blindness too blind to comprehend? It was this thought that put him on the knife-point of agony.

Therefore the tailor, after much self-questioning and continuing doubt, decided he would seek the self-styled angel in Harlem. Of course he had great difficulty, because he had not asked for specific directions, and movement was tedious to him. The subway took him to 116th Street, and from there he wandered in the dark world. It was vast and its lights lit nothing. Everywhere were shadows, often moving. Manishevitz hobbled along with the aid of a cane, and not knowing where to seek in the blackened tenement buildings, looked fruitlessly through store windows. In the stores he saw people and *everybody* was black. It was an amazing thing to observe. When he was too tired, too unhappy to go farther, Manishevitz stopped in front of a tailor's store. Out of familiarity with the appearance of it, with some sadness he entered. The tailor, an old skinny Negro

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with a mop of wooly gray hair, was sitting cross-legged on his work-bench, sewing a pair of full-dress pants that had a razor slit all the way down the seat.

"You'll excuse me, please, gentleman," said Manishevitz, admiring the tailor's deft, thimbled fingerwork, but you know maybe somebody by the name Alexander Levine?"

The tailor, who Manishevitz thought, seemed a little antagonistic to him, scratched his scalp.

"Cain't say I ever heared dat name."

"Alex-ander Lev-ine," Manishevitz repeated it.

The man shook his head. "Cain't say I heared."

About to depart, Manishevitz remembered to say: "He is an angel, maybe."

"Oh, him," said the tailor clucking. "He hang out in dat honky tonk down here a ways." He pointed with his skinny finger and returned to the pants.

Manishevitz crossed the street against a red light and was almost run down by a taxi. On the block after the next, the sixth store from the corner was a cabaret, and the name in sparkling lights was Bella's. Ashamed to go in, Manishevitz gazed through the neon-lit window, and when

the dancing couples had parted and drifted away, he discovered at a table on the side, towards the rear, Levine.

He was sitting alone, a cigarette butt hanging from the corner of his mouth, playing solitaire with a dirty pack of cards, and Manishevitz felt a touch of pity for him, for Levine had deteriorated in appearance. His derby was dented and had a gray smudge on the side. His ill-fitting suit was shabbier, as if he had been sleeping in it. His shoes and trouser cuffs were muddy, and his face was covered with an impenetrable stubble the color of licorice. Manishevitz, though deeply disappointed, was about to enter, when a big-breasted Negress in a purple evening gown appeared before Levine's table, and with much laughter through many teeth, broke into a vigorous shimmy. Levine looked straight at Manishevitz with a haunted expression, but the tailor was too paralyzed to move or acknowledge it. As Bella's gyrations continued, Levine rose, his eyes lit in excitement. She embraced him with vigor, both his hands clasped around her big restless buttocks and they tangoed together across the floor, loudly applauded by the noisy customers. She seemed to

have lifted Levine off his feet and his large shoes hung limp as they danced. They slid past the windows where Manishevitz, white-faced, stood staring in. Levine winked slyly and the tailor left for home.

Fanny lay at death's door. Through shrunken lips she muttered concerning her childhood, the sorrows of the marriage bed, the loss of her children, yet wept to live. Manishevitz tried not to listen, but even without ears he would have heard. It was not a gift. The doctor panted up the stairs, a broad but bland, unshaven man (it was Sunday) and soon shook his head. A day at most, or two. He left at once, not without pity, to spare himself Manishevitz's multiplied sorrow; the man who never stopped hurting. He would someday get him into a public home.

Manishevitz visited a synagogue and there spoke to God, but God had absented himself. The tailor searched his heart and found no hope. When she died he would live dead. He considered taking his life although he knew he wouldn't. He railed against God—Can you love a rock, a broom an emptiness? Baring his chest, he smote the naked bones, cursing himself for having

believed.

Asleep in a chair that afternoon, he dreamed of Levine. He was standing before a faded mirror, preening small decaying opalescent wings. "This means," mumbled Manishevitz, as he broke out of sleep, "that it is possible he could be an angel." Begging a neighbor lady to look in on Fanny and occasionally wet her lips with a few drops of water, he drew on his thin coat, gripped his walking stick, exchanged some pennies for a subway token, and rode to Harlem. He knew this act was the last desperate one of his woe; to go without belief, seeking a black magician to restore his wife to invalidism. Yet if there was no choice, he did at least what was chosen.

He hobbled to Bella's but the place had changed hands. It was now, as he breathed, a synagogue in a store. In the front, towards him, were several rows of empty wooden benches. In the rear stood the Ark, its portals of rough wood covered with rainbows of sequins; under it a long table on which lay the sacred scroll unrolled, illuminated by the dim light from a bulb on a chain overhead. Around the table, as if frozen to it and the scroll, which they all touched with their fin-

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gers, sat four Negroes wearing skullcaps. Now as they read the Holy Word, Manischevitz could, through the plate glass window, hear the singsong chant of their voices. One of them was old, with a gray beard. One was bubble-eyed. One was hump-backed. The fourth was a boy, no older than thirteen. Their heads moved in rhythmic swaying. Touched by this sight from his childhood and youth, Manischevitz entered and stood silent in the rear.

"Neshoma," said bubble eyes, pointing to the word with a stubby finger. "Now what dat mean?"

"That's the word that means soul," said the boy. He wore glasses.

"Let's git on wid de commentary," said the old man.

"Ain't necessary," said the humpback. "Souls is immaterial substance. That's all. The soul is derived in that manner. The immateriality is derived from the substance, and they both, casually an' otherwise, derived from the soul. There can be no higher."

"That's the highest."

"Over de top."

"Wait a minute," said bubble eyes. "I don't see what is dat immaterial substance. How come de one gits hitched up to de odder?" He addressed the humpback.

"Ask me something hard. Because it is substanceless immateriality. It couldn't be closer together, like all the parts of the body under one skin—closer."

"Here now," said the old man.

"All you done is switched de words."

"It's the primum mobile, the substanceless substance from which comes all things that were incepted in the idea—you, me and everything and body else."

"Now how did all dat happen? Make it sound simple."

"It de speerit," said the old man. "On de face of de water moved de speerit. An' dat was good. It say so in de Book. From de speerit ariz de man."

"But now listen here. How come it become substance if it all de time a spirit?"

"God alone done dat."

"Holy! Holy! raise His Name."

"But has dis spirit got some kind of a shade or color?" asked bubble eyes, deadpan.

"Man of course not. A spirit is a spirit."

"Then how come we is colored?" he said with a triumphant glare.

"Ain't got nothing to do wid dat."

"I still like to know."

"God put the spirit in all things," answered the boy. "He put it in

the green leaves and the yellow flowers. He put it with the gold in the fishes and the blue in the sky. That's how come it came to us."

"Amen."

"Praise Lawd and utter loud His speechless name."

"Blow de bugle till it bust the sky."

They fell silent, intent upon the next word. Manishevitz approached them.

"You'll excuse me," he said. "I am looking for Alexander Levine. You know him maybe?"

"That's the angel," said the boy.

"Oh, *him*," snuffed bubble eyes.

"You'll find him at Bella's. It's the establishment right across the street," the humpback said.

Manishevitz said he was sorry that he could not stay, thanked them, and limped across the street. It was already night. The city was dark and he could barely find his way.

But Bella's was bursting with the blues. Through the window Manishevitz recognized the dancing crowd and among them sought Levine. He was sitting loose-lipped at Bella's side table. They were tippling from an almost empty whiskey fifth. Levine had shed his old clothes, wore a shiny new checkered suit, pearl-gray

derby, cigar, and big, two-button shoes. To the tailor's dismay, a drunken look had settled upon his formerly dignified face. He leaned toward Bella, tickled her ear lobe with his pinky, while whispering words that sent her into gales of raucous laughter. She fondled his knee.

Manishevitz, girding himself, pushed open the door and was not welcomed.

"This place reserved."

"Beat it, pale puss."

"Exit, Yanke, Semitic trash."

But he moved towards the table where Levine sat, the crowd breaking before him as he hobbled forward.

"Mr. Levine," he spoke in a trembly voice. "Is here Manishevitz."

Levine glared blearily. "Speak yo' piece, son."

Manishevitz shuddered. His back plagued him. Cold tremors tormented his crooked legs. He looked around, everybody was all ears.

"You'll excuse me. I would like to talk to you in a private place."

"Speak. Ah is a private pusson."

Bella laughed piercingly. "Stop it, boy, you killin' me."

Manishevitz, no end disturbed, considered fleeing but Levine addressed him:

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"Kindly state the pu'pose of yo' communication with yo's truly."

The tailor wet cracked lips.
"You are Jewish. This I am sure."

Levine rose, nostrils flaring.
"Anythin' else yo' got to say?"

Manischewitz's tongue lay like stone.

"Speak now or fo'ever hold off."

Tears blinded the tailor's eyes.
Was ever man so tried? Should he say he believed a half-drunken Negro to be an angel?

The silence slowly petrified.

Manischewitz was recalling scenes of his youth as a while in his mind whirred; believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes. He sighed. It moved but one had still to make a choice.

"I think you are an angel from God." He said it in a broken voice, thinking. If you said it it was said. If you believed it you must say it. If you believed, you believed . . .

The hush broke. Everybody talked but the music began and they went on dancing. Bella, grown bored, picked up the cards and dealt herself a hand.

Levine burst into tears. "How you have humiliated me."

Manischewitz apologized.

"Wait'll I freshen up." Levine went to the men's room and returned in his old clothes.

No one said goodbye as they left.

They rode to the flat via subway. As they walked up the stairs Manischewitz pointed with his cane at his door.

"That's all been taken care of," Levine said. "You best go in while I take off."

Disappointed that it was so soon over but torn by curiosity, Manischewitz followed the angel up three flights to the roof. When he got there the door was already padlocked.

Luckily he could see through a small broken window. He heard an odd noise, as though of a whirring of wings, and when he strained for a wider view, could have sworn he saw a dark figure borne aloft on a pair of magnificent black wings.

A feather drifted down. Manischewitz grasped at it turned white, but it was only snowing.

He rushed downstairs. In the flat Fanny wielded a dust mop under the bed and then upon the cobwebs on the wall.

"A wonderful thing, Fanny," Manischewitz said. "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere."



MEGHAPADAM

For the past twelve years, astute readers of imaginative fiction have been enjoying the neat prose turned out by Edward W. Ludwig, whose work has appeared regularly in most of the science-fiction and fantasy magazine both here and abroad.

A Coast Guard veteran of World War II, he served overseas in the Philippines. Now living in Stockton, California with his family, he works for the county but expects shortly to become a full time freelance writer.

He has been a professional piano player and is married to a folk singer named Chris. Evenings around the Ludwig household are spent in "playing guitars, singing, and drinking beer."

His first science-fiction novel is in the works and is promised for publication later in the year. Meanwhile, here is his latest story, a gentle fantasy about a man who has a problem which he turns into a solution.

THE (IN)VISIBLE MAN

Edward W. Ludwig

Mr. James Smith straightened, sucked air into his small chest, rubbed a white fist into a clammy palm, tensed, and took a single step into the drugstore.

This is it, he told himself. This is Part One of the Test. This is an hour that may change the path of your life. This is an hour which could change the destiny of the human race.

He moved forward, both exhilarated and frightened. He seated himself at the busy drugstore lunch counter.

Five minutes after twelve, noon.
He waited.

A fat man to his left licked scarlet remains of cherry pie from his lips, belched, and left.

"Waitress!" called Mr. James Smith.

A hustling and a bustling behind the counter. Plates rattled, glasses tinkled, bubbling liquids squished from fountain spigots. Thin-armed busboys grappled with trays of dirty dishes. White-uniformed waitresses criss-crossed the spaces behind the counter.

A teen-aged girl with bleached hair like an abandoned rat's nest squirmed into the vacant chair beside him.

A fleshy-jowled waitress appeared before her. "Yes?"

"Hi." The girl tongued her gum and scowled. "Le's see.. Maybe a — nah. Or maybe — yeah! A chili-burger and coke."

"Waitress!" shouted James Smith.

The waitress melted into a noisy, odor-packed distance.

Fifteen minutes after twelve, noon.

Mr. Smith sighed and eyed his reflection in the long mirror behind the counter.

He had to admit that he didn't look extraordinary. He looked, he thought bitterly, quite ordinary. In fact, damn it, he looked the very epitome of ordinariness.

He looked his age, which was fifty. His hair wasn't white enough to give him distinction. It held just enough gray to make it colorless. His face was neither round nor oval nor square, his body neither tall nor short, fat nor thin, muscular nor feeble. His flesh was neither firm nor flabby, bronzed nor white, wrinkled nor smooth.

And his voice was neither loud nor soft, deep nor shrill, commanding nor apologetic. It was, alas, a chameleon voice, elusive and

smoke-like, capable of being dissolved by the murmur of a child, a whisper of wind.

If a glimmer of individuality existed anywhere about him, it was in his gray astigmatic eyes — and hidden behind the slightly tinted glass of his spectacles.

He mumbled a four-lettered word. Oh, for the nose of a Cyrano de Bergerac, the paunch of a Falstaff, the evil gaze of a Rasputin!

He was a human chameleon blending in with his world, ignored, unnoticed.

But remember, this is what you want. You don't want to be noticed — not now, when you have the Plan.

Twenty-five minutes after twelve, noon.

Mr. James Smith's stomach twitched. Odors of sizzling hamburger and juicy steak and crisp french fries and steaming coffee and tangy onion soup stung his nostrils like intoxicating fumes. He was becoming giddy.

He thumped his fist on the counter. He rattled the napkin container. He sailed the menu into the air, spinning it like a flying saucer into a sink full of soapy dishes.

"I want to order!" he shrilled. "Waitress! Waitress!"

A stiff-backed, middle-aged

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woman to his right cast him a swift derogatory glance, then turned her attention back to her pineapple jello.

Thirty-five minutes after twelve, noon.

The teen-aged girl devoured her chiliburger. She was replaced by a boy of ten or so who blew bubbles into his chocolate milkshake. The stiff-backed, middle-aged woman vacated her chair to a creaky-legged old man whose thin hands spilled water, milk, and catsup onto his soft-boiled egg.

Fifty-five minutes after twelve, noon.

Mr. James Smith wiped a layer of nervous perspiration from his forehead. The almost hypnotic odors of food swept away all coherent thought, like wind dissolving smoke.

He rose wide-eyed, hunkered forward over the counter. His muscles tightened.

A thin-faced, stringy-haired waitress passed, humming.

Like a serpent, Mr. James Smith struck. His right hand grasped the waitress' shoulder. His fingers dug into the fabric of her white uniform. Off balance, he fought to keep erect. His left hand sent salt and pepper shakers, sugar bowl, and napkin container clattering to the floor.

He recovered his balance and straightened, triumphant, pulling in his quarry.

The waitress smiled pleasantly. "Goodness, you *do* want to be waited on, don't you?"

Mr. James Smith released his grasp on her uniform and returned a feeble smile. "Well, I — that is —"

The woman's nose crinkled rather attractively. Despite her bony shoulders and stringy hair, there was a warmth in her wide brown eyes, an appearance of softness in her full lips that made Mr. James Smith's heart beat faster.

"I'll be with you, sir, in just a moment," said the woman, bending to pick up the shakers, bowl and container.

Someone called, "Sadie! Two to go!"

Abruptly she was gone.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Twenty minutes after one p.m.

Sadie had forgotten, of course. Naturally.

But you want it this way, he assured himself. *This means the Test is succeeding.*

His stomach was twitching more than ever. He felt on the verge of fainting.

He rose and strode behind the counter. Two waitresses bumped his shoulders quite hard, but he

located a hamburger bun and relish, and appropriated one of the sizzling burgers from the stove.

"Darn," he murmured to the chef, "I wish I knew where you kept the mustard."

Unnoticed, he gulped down the burger.

He breathed more easily as he left the store.

It was all right after all, he decided. Part One of the Test had succeeded . . .

Mr. Smith worked in a factory which made things. He stood in a place by a slow-moving rubber belt. When a gidget appeared on the moving belt he deftly attached a widget to the upper-most section of it.

He often wondered what the completed product was.

He felt fortunate at having obtained the job. Usually upon applying for work, here'd be an interview and then he'd be forgotten. This time there'd been a slip-up. On the morning of the interview he'd had a touch of Asiatic flu combined with a hang-over. The greater part of his day had been occupied with stumbling expeditions to bathroom and coffee pot.

Apparently, his prospective employer associated his name with that of someone else. Despite the

absence of an interview, he was hired.

Now, he arrived back at work twenty-three minutes late, but no one noticed.

It was time for Part Two of the Test.

He'd just finished attaching his seventeenth widget to his seventeenth gidget when Mr. Thomas Malloy approached him on one of his daily inspections. Usually the squint-eyed Supervisor, who also seemed to think James Smith was someone else, would say:

"How's it going, Mike?"

James Smith would say, "My name's not Mike. It's James. James Smith."

"Good. Glad to hear it, Mike. How are the wife and kids?"

"I'm not married and don't have any kids."

"Fine, fine. What's new in the bowling league?"

"I don't belong to any bowling league."

"Fine. Keep up the good work, Mike. Say hello to the wife and kids."

James Smith now deliberately let a gidget slip by without attaching a widget. He tried to match Mr. Malloy's eagle-eyed squint with a steely gaze.

"How's it going, Mike?"

"Lousy," replied James Smith.

THE (IN)VISIBLE MAN

"This joint stinks. You stink. I quit."

"Good. Glad to hear it, Mike. How are the wife and kids?"

"Slaughtered them last night and locked their dismembered remains in a trunk. It'll be delivered to your house tonight, C.O.D. I do hope there's no dripping."

"Fine, fine. What's new in the bowling league?"

"I don't belong to a bowling league. I don't have time because I spend my evenings getting drunk. If I have a sober moment outside work, I devote it to attempted rape."

"Fine. Keep up the good work, Mike. Say hello to the wife and kids."

"Oh, just one more thing before I quit. I intend to walk into your office and tear up your files."

"Sure. Fine, Mike."

Mr. James Smith walked into Malloy's office, nodded to the secretary and the assistant supervisor. He stopped before the file cabinet, yanked open a drawer. "Are these the current orders?"

The blonde secretary looked up, dismissing his presence with a shrug. The boyish-faced assistant muttered something without looking up.

One by one, with appropriate flourishes, James Smith ripped,

tore, shredded the file of orders.

"There!" he cried, triumphant.

The secretary and the assistant said nothing.

Ha! He was ready for the last and most crucial part of the Test.

Morning. Ten a.m.

He left his third-floor cubicle which was optimistically called an apartment and passed old Mrs. Gosset, his fat landlady, sweeping the front steps.

"Good morning, Mrs. Gosset," he said, just as he had for almost every morning for the past three years.

"Grummph," said Mrs. Gosset, just as *she* had almost every morning for the past three years.

January sunlight filtered through a smoggy haze into the carbon dioxide air of the city. Traffic lights blinked and clanged, autos rumbled, people shivered and continued to bump into Mr. James Smith.

It was time for the Pacific Coast Bank to open.

Mr. James Smith trembled more from fear than from cold. Suppose someone suddenly noticed him, or heard him, or — No, don't think about that, he commanded himself. Confidence. That was the thing. He'd be like the hero in a John Wayne movie, slow-moving, relaxed, strong, ready.

He paused at an intersection and lit a cigarette. The ethical question was pricking again at his conscience, but that, he decided, could be easily rationalized. It wouldn't be right to rob a poor one-legged news-vendor or a blind man selling pencils, or for that matter anyone whose majority of earnings seemed to be channeled into income tax.

But a bank — well, after all, the universe in a sense had robbed him of love, marriage, friendship, recognition. It had imprisoned him behind cold walls of loneliness. It had made him a nothing-man, a silent shadow who existed in dreary apartments and behind belts with gidgets and widgets on them. It was only fair to seize something in exchange.

Stop it, he thought. Stop thinking. Do it Now.

The Pacific Coast Bank made him think of a colossal Roman edifice, the financial center of the world. There were great blocks of gray concrete, a cavernous entrance flanked by walls inlaid with blue mosaic filigree, glass-paneled swinging doors, and high shiny windows with steel-slatted shutters slanted to filter out sunlight.

Mr. James Smith moved closer, eyes narrowing.

Grim-faced customers striding

in and out impressed him as being titans of capitalism, all engaged upon tremendous transactions which would alter the history of mankind. A single stroke of a pen in the hands of these gray-suited men, he imagined, might launch ships with fantastic cargoes, signal the fall or creation of empires, send rockets jetting to the Moon, drain oceans, irrigate deserts, paralyze Wall Street, start a world war.

Mr. James Smith, for a moment, felt as though he were shrinking into himself.

Then he told himself, *Maybe after today you'll be able to do all those things. Maybe you'll be the mightiest of all the gray-suited men!*

His feet reached the stone steps of the entrance. Up, up to the swinging doors. A gray-suited man, and one in blue, bumped into him, not noticing.

Through the swinging doors. He nodded at a uniformed bank guard. "Good morning. Cold, isn't it?"

The guard said nothing.

James Smith passed cashiers and tellers and railings and counters. He spotted a sign that said MEN. He knew he should have gone there first, but now he wanted to finish the Test, to get it over and

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done.

An elderly lady with a leashed cat jostled his shoulder.

The cat meowed.

He walked toward a swinging gate at the rear of the bank. His unsteady hand stretched outward, pushed the gate in. He entered. He was in an area of desks and file cabinets and people doing things with buzzing, clicking machines.

He strode past the rear of the tellers' cages and for the first time caught glimpses of neat piles of coins and currency.

He bit his lower lip. *Don't wait. Do it now.*

He ambled up to the nearest teller's cage where a black-haired young man was plopping a rubber stamp on a series of checks.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice quavering.

The young man apparently didn't hear him.

"Excuse me," he said again, tapping him on the shoulder.

The young man grunted and moved slightly aside, still stamping the checks.

James Smith tried to pull out the cash drawer. "Please," he exclaimed, impatiently. "I can't get this open."

"Oh." The teller inched back.

James Smith yanked out the

drawer and thumbed through the currency. He counted:

"One hundred, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. That's enough. Thank you."

The teller shuffled back into his original position.

"I said *Thank you*," repeated James Smith.

"Hummm," murmured the teller, still stamping. . .

Ah, what a wonderful day! Mr. James Smith was floating in his private April world which obliterated the January cold. The sun was blazing, birds were twittering, he was eighteen years old and eleven feet tall and would live forever.

He hid the thousand dollars in his dresser drawer just behind his socks and beneath the set of hair brushes he never used. Then he strolled back to the drugstore so elated that, for a change, he deliberately bumped into two gray-suited men on the sidewalk, a blonde in a fur coat, and a child of about seven who was clutching a teddy bear.

In the drugstore he sauntered behind the counter, selected the thickest T-bone steak from the refrigerator, fried it, helped himself to a generous green salad, french fries, and apple pie with mint ice cream and coffee.

He was starting on the pie when a soft voice said, "Hi. Aren't you late today?"

"Huh?"

"Hi. Aren't you late today?"

He adjusted his spectacles and blinked into the smiling features of the waitress named Sadie. It took a moment for her words to penetrate his mind. Surprised, he murmured, "No, that is, yes. But not really."

Sadie's full-lipped smile faded. "M — maybe I thought you were someone else. I was thinking you were somebody who couldn't get waited on yesterday. I guess —"

"No, that was me. I — I really grabbed you, didn't I?"

The smile returned, revealing a mouth extremely full of teeth. "I knew it was you. You seemed different today, but — say, won't you be late for work?"

"No, not today. I — I —"

"You're between jobs?"

"Sort of, I guess, but —"

"You're looking?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I'm just enjoying myself, just strolling around."

Sadie's dark eyes narrowed. "That's what I plan to do when I get off work in ten minutes."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Hummmmm."

"Where are you going to stroll to, Jack? Or is it Bill, or Tom? Frank? Henry?"

"James. James Smith."

"Where are you going to stroll to, Jimmie?"

He thought. "Oh, maybe the zoo. I haven't been there in quite awhile."

"Gee, that sounds nice. I would like that."

"Uh-huh."

"I'll meet you then, okay?"

"Huh?"

"I'll see you in ten minutes. Okay, Jimmie?"

"F — fine."

After nine minutes and thirty seconds realization hit him. Not only had a person finally noticed and recognized him, but that person was also a woman. And he even had a date with her!

Goodness sakes.

Come to think of it, Sadie was pretty nice-looking after all. Her full, soft-appearing lips more than counteracted the protrusion of her large teeth. She really wasn't as thin as he'd first thought, and she really wasn't old — probably not over thirty-five. Her voice was sensually and hypnotically soft, and her hair wasn't stringy at all. Her hair-do was informal, perhaps, but quite natural, quite right.

And to her, he was Jimmie

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Smith. Boy, Sadie was really a classy dish!

He awoke the next morning as if still in a wondrous dream. But it was all true, all the fabulous remembrances.

"You're so wonderful with animals," Sadie had cooed at the zoo. "You can go right up to them, and they don't even move. Why, they hardly notice you."

Although he'd felt that he'd hardly uttered a word, Sadie had said, "You're such a marvelous conversationalist. Compared to you, my first husband was an idiot. It's been so marvelous talking and talking to you."

He leaped out of bed.

Hal Time to go to work, he thought mischievously.

He comandeered three thousand dollars from the First National Bank, counted out three dollars and seventy-five cents for living expenses, hid the remainder behind socks and under hairbrushes, and took Sadie for a Chop Suey dinner at the Purple Pagoda.

The next day, Wednesday, he requisitioned seven thousand from the City Savings and Loan, subtracted a twenty-dollar bill for living expenses, and escorted Sadie to a French art movie.

To quiet any possible qualms from his conscience, he mailed a

thousand in cash to the East End Boy's Center. He chuckled. The Robin Hood of Thirty-Seventh Street!

Thursday, it was fourteen thousand from the Western States Bank, three hundred for living expenses (partially necessitated by his purchase of light gray slacks, a blue-and-orange sport coat, polka-dot bow tie, and green hat-, and — to economize, as Sadie put it — devoured a home-cooked meal of pot roast, pineapple fritters, mashed potatoes, tossed salad, and cherry pie in Sadie's small second-story apartment.

Friday morning, he started back toward his original victim, the Pacific Coast Bank. His April world was brighter than ever. He had the strength of Sampson, the charm of Cyrano, the cleverness of Rasputin.

A newsboy on the corner grinned at him for no reason and said, "Hi."

"Hi," said Jimmie Smith.

He bumped into a thin lady with an umbrella.

"Excuse me," said the lady.

He straightened his polka-dot bow tie and ambled into the Pacific Coast Bank. The uniformed bank guard greeted him with a cheery, "Good morning."

Jimmie Smith walked three

steps forward, then froze.

His mind seemed to explode in a kaleidoscopic fury of impressions and realizations. First came the jarring glimpse of the bank guard wheeling toward him, eyes like X-Ray lights focusing upon him. Almost simultaneously he cringed at the sight of two men in plain clothes eyeing him from the rear of the bank, moving toward him.

He whirled back toward the entrance. An alarm bell sounded, a near-deafening cacophony in his eardrums.

Through his brain, above all other impressions and realizations, screamed the thought: *Something went wrong. Something happened. They see me!*

His stumbling legs carried him out the entrance, down the steps onto an icy sidewalk. A siren whined in the distance, crescendoing into a bloodhound wail.

Mr. James Smith ran.

He ran through a world that was no longer as one of April. It was a bitter gray world of loneliness, of savagery, of terror. The shrill of the siren was like an icy hand clamped tight about his throat, following, inescapable.

The throbbing blood in his temples obscured coherent thought. Only the animal impulse of *Run, run, run!* absorbed his

consciousness . . .

An eternity passed.

His weary legs buckled. He felt his aching body sink down, his mouth and throat gasping for air. Down, down, onto a dark coldness.

He lay on his back. Blood slowed in his temples, his heart ceased pounding, his lungs no longer fought for breath. He was cold and shivering, but alive and whole. A measure of coherency returned to his consciousness.

He was in the entrance of an alley, flanked by two brick buildings. It was night. The fog was a gossamer veil cloaking his presence.

He no longer heard the scream of the siren. There were the ordinary January-night sounds: the swish of tires on wet streets, the occasional tap of feet on the sidewalk, the lonely howl of a dog, and, barely audible, the suggestion of radio music, far away.

For the moment, he'd escaped.

He knew he'd been a fool. He should have realized that police would have been investigating, analyzing, watching, doing wonderful things with miracles of science.

What had *really* happened?

He had changed, he decided. Not just because of the gray slacks and blue-and-orange sport coat

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and polka-dot bow tie and green hat. No, there'd been something much more basic. Maybe there was more to the concept of telepathy than people realized. Maybe each person was a kind of broadcasting station, radiating his optimism, pessimism, confidence, shyness, badness, conformity, non-conformity, love, hatred, intelligence, stupidity, sensitivity, dullness. And maybe the strongest of all these radiations was the magic glow that comes from knowing that one is needed and loved.

Maybe each person, too, was a kind of receiver, absorbing those broadcasts from others. Maybe that was why one person could enter a room unnoticed while another could at once become the focus of attention.

Before he'd discovered his capabilities, his mind had been like a broadcasting station with no power. His mind had been entombed in black loneliness and frustration. Now it was a jack-in-the-box, at last released by the adventures of the Plan and of Sadie.

A new impulse broke into his consciousness. *My money. I must get my money.*

He sucked cold air deep into his lungs and tried to shake the cobwebs of fear and exhaustion

from his mind.

He found a street sign which read River Avenue and 7th.

Where in the world was he?

He walked this way and that, first to 8th Street and back to 7th, then over to Elm and Poplar and Walnut.

He wondered what time it was. Midnight? 3:00 a.m.? Anyway, it was a time of silence and coldness and darkness. A time of empty streets and sleep.

Finally he came to familiar buildings, familiar street signs. He discovered he was thirsty. Coffee would taste good, a shot of bourbon even better. He stopped beneath a streetlight and counted his money. One, two, three, four, five, six dollars and sixty-seven cents. Certainly enough for a drink or two.

But coffee shops and bars were closed. That meant it must be past 2:00 a.m.

Out of the fog behind him came a rattle of bottles. Someone bumped into him. A white-suited milkman turned, started to say something, said nothing.

The night seemed less deep now. A luminescence was filtering into the streets. Cars were beginning to swish more frequently down the wet pavements.

Before he realized it, he stood

before his apartment house. His gaze sharpened. An icy shiver of fear crept down his spine.

Two police cars were parked before the apartment house. The lights were on in his third-story apartment. Behind the shaded windows he glimpsed suggestions of movement.

They had beaten him here. They knew who he was, had found the money.

All was gone, all was lost. He was a criminal. There would only be running now, and hiding. He would cringe in dark alleyways like a hunted animal, fearing to sleep, never again to know Love, never again to be with Sadie, unless —

Unless he were captured, tried, imprisoned, and served his sentence.

Why not?

Why not put an end to fearing and running?

He clenched his fists, strode into the building and mounted the stairs.

Two uniformed policemen stood by the open door of his apartment. Just inside the entrance was old Mrs. Gosset, his landlady, talking to a tall man in plain clothes. A detective, probably.

James Smith passed the uniformed cop unnoticed. He tapped

the tall man on the shoulder. "I'm here. I confess."

The detective ignored him.

"I did it," said James Smith. "I confess."

No one noticed him.

James Smith stomped his foot. "Hey! I want to confess! I want to surrender!"

The detective turned, annoyed. "What do *you* want? Who are *you*?"

"I'm James Smith. I want to confess."

A reluctant realization seemed to enter the detective's mind. "You're James Smith? You live here?"

The fat little landlady bent forward and grumbled, "Wait a minute, officer. I've never seen this man before."

James Smith gasped. "Mrs. Gosset! I've lived here for three years. I've passed you almost every morning for three years. You *must* remember me."

Mrs. Gosset shook her white-haired head. "You're a nut. James Smith is — let's see, what *did* he look like?" She scowled. "I know. He was tall, about six foot two, black hair, a slight limp, I believe, in the left leg — or maybe the right. Anyway, a slight —"

"Get out of here," the detective commanded James Smith. "We've

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got enough to worry about without being bothered by you crackpots."

Goodness, thought James Smith, not quite certain whether to feel happy or sad. Even Mrs. Gosset thinks I'm someone else.

Two days passed.

James Smith found he was not happy at all. He was very sad.

He rented a furnished room for a dollar a night and existed on his six dollars and sixty-seven cents.

He found it impossible to be noticed even in the emptiest cafe. But, although his arms and body were sore from being bumped and jostled, he found that by standing in line before a supermarket check stand he could purchase bread and milk.

He had no inclination to attempt a requisitioning of funds from a bank. His weary conscience rebelled even at cooking his own meals as he had in the drugstore restaurant. He felt that the game was over and done. He'd played and lost. The transmitter was off, forever.

When his money was gone, he sold his gray slacks, blue-and-orange sport coat, polka-dot bow tie, and green hat to a Salvation Army Exchange for six dollars. He bought a worn brown flannel suit for a dollar seventy-five.

On the third day he changed rooms. The new one rented for the same price but had an old-fashioned gas heater hulking under a faded, cracked wall.

The windows, he first made sure, was reasonably air-tight. Gas, he'd decided — even before the development of the Plan — would be the most comfortable method of permanent escape. Drowning seemed quite dramatic, and he still savoured the memorable ending of Jack London's *Martin Eden*. But his bones, he felt, had known enough of coldness.

A leap from a twenty-story building — spectacular, but messy.

The sight of his lifeless body dangling from a light fixture might terrify a landlord, but more probably even in death he'd be unnoticed. An unfeeling janitor would merely sweep up the dust of his bones a decade or two hence.

Poison — brrrrrrr.

It had to be gas.

He *did* wish that he could have met the End in his gray slacks, blue-and-orange sport coat, polka-dot bow tie, and green hat.

On the morning of the fifth day he locked all windows and doors, drew shades, turned on the gas, lay down on the bed. He sniffed.

Goodbye to this lousy world and years of loneliness and futility. This lousy world . . . with nothing good in it . . . Nothing good at all . . . except . . . except . . . maybe . . . Sadie.

Laboriously, he lifted himself up on an elbow. It *would* be nice to see Sadie just once more . . . for the last . . . time.

He smiled weakly and struggled to rise. He sank back, head spinning. He turned over, tried again.

He gulped fresh air. He gulped and walked and gulped and walked. His mind cleared.

He sat down at the busy drug-store lunch counter.

Five minutes after twelve, noon.

He waited.

A fat man to his right licked yellow remains of lemon pie from his lips and left.

James Smith didn't try to attract attention.

The last time, he thought. The only good thing in the world.

A teen-aged boy with a greasy crew-cut sat down beside him.

"Hil" exclaimed a soft, sultry voice.

Sadie.

James Smith waited for the teen-aged boy to reply.

"Jimmie! I said, 'Hil' Where you been?"

James Smith gasped.

"It's been days and days and days!" beamed Sadie, grinning and showing her teeth. "I tried so hard to find you!"

James Smith blinked. "I — I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Oh, how silly! Still haven't got a job, huh?"

"Well, not exactly. That is —"

"I thought so. You'll get another, honey. You can't miss. Listen, I can take a break in five minutes. You can tell me all about it. Okay?"

"Er, I mean, yes. Yes!"

Gleefully, he cleared his throat. He was again eighteen years old and eleven feet tall. He felt like a broadcasting station warming up, starting to transmit.

And suddenly he was no longer James Smith. He was *Jimmie Smith* — not the *old* Jimmie who strode into banks and fried purloined T-bones, but a new Jimmie whom he didn't even know yet.

"Please pass the salt," he said to the teen-aged boy.

The boy jerked to attention. "Certainly, sir."

"Menu, please."

Two waitresses handed him menus.

Sadie appeared, smiling. "Ready, honey?"

"Ready," said Jimmie Smith.

Miriam Allen deFord needs, as the show biz crowd likes to put it, no introduction. She is well-known to all readers of science-fiction/fantasy and mystery stories, and a casual glance at her biography in WHO'S WHO will reveal a string of credits any writer would be proud of. A request for additional biographical material brought us the following:

"I am at present editing an anthology for a paperback publisher of science-fiction stories (all by well known s-f authors) which are also inherently crime stories. I am also working on a literary biography. My most recent book was *Stone Walls; Prisons from Fetters to Furloughs*, and I hope soon to get out a volume of my collected true crime articles. I am on the national board of directors of the Mystery Writers of America, and am on the short story award committee for the MWA's next "Edgar." (I myself won the 1960 non-fiction "Edgar" for *The Overbury Affair*.) My own latest appearance in an anthology was in *A Pride of Felons*; I was regional editor of and contributed to *The Quality of Murder*. I wrote the Introduction to *Masterpieces of Murder*, the collected Edmund Pearson articles edited by Gerald Gross. One of my mystery stories will be telecast soon on the *Alfred Hitchcock Show*."

INSIDE STORY

Miriam Allen deFord

He may have been the loneliest thing in all existence, but he did not know his loneliness, for he had lost awareness long ago of the possibility of any being outside him.

His half-conscious memory, dulled by lack of events, went back illimitable ages, to the very

beginning of his being as an entity. It went, dimly, even beyond—to the coalition of countless individual lives into one functioning whole, like the submersion of the individual bee in the populous hive, or the fusion of the individual red corpuscle with the bloodstream. It was too immeas-

urably far in the past for it to have real meaning for him any more. And yet there was an awareness—of something—and apprehension flooded his being.

We were sure at first we'd found a bonus planet.

Unless you're a scout yourself, you can't imagine what that means. It isn't just the extra pay, though of course that's welcome, and so is the extra leave; it's the feeling that at last you've accomplished what you were trained to do. Most scouts reach retirement without ever in all their careers having been one of a crew that has discovered a bonus planet—one suitable for colonization by one of the races inhabiting overcrowded worlds in the Federation, and one which isn't already preempted by an intelligent dominant race of its own.

(That's why we call ourselves space-fleas — though we're not keen on having outsiders use the term. We spend our lives hopping around trying to locate a good place to bite.)

It isn't so awfully hard just to find hitherto unvisited planets on the fringes of the Galaxy. But 999 times out of 1000, either they have atmospheric or climatic or gravitational conditions that put them out of the running for any

Galfed colonists, no matter how overpopulated their own home planet may be, or else they're already occupied by intelligent inhabitants of their own, thank you: in which case all we can do is report to Liaison, which sends delegates to negotiate. If the indigenes refuse to join the Federation (we've had instances of actual aggression, something which exists only in history in Galfed), or if on investigation they don't seem ready, they're put on the list for future visits at century intervals, and made out of bounds meanwhile for other Galfed visitors.

Which means, for us scouts, that we've just marked up another goose-egg.

As for locating a bonus planet that one or more of the actual crew which discovers it could live on, that is almost unheard of, even though it is with just that possibility in mind that all scoutships are manned—if you can call it that—by members of as many Galfed races as there are crewmen. In other words, the ordinary scoutship carries a crew of six; and all of them will be from separate planets and usually from separate systems. In the ship that found this planet, for instance, I was the only Solarian.

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I suppose that's one reason that we scouts seem alien and a bit repellent to our own kind when we're home on leave. In spite of all the nondiscrimination laws, and in spite of the innumerable visitors to every Federation planet—all kinds of xenies from outer space—the average Terran, say, never gets really chummy with non-Terrans, and he never forgets for a minute how different they are. So there seems to him something queer about a fellow-Terran whose best friends may have six eyes or eight legs. For example, my own pal for many years—Xo and I always try to get assigned to the same ship—is a Capellan II. To anyone who has never been farther away from home than Mars, it seems grotesque that I should run around with something that looks like a six-foot-long green caterpillar, with one mouth in his stomach to eat with and another in his head to talk with. I invited Xo home with me on leave just once; people tried to be polite, but I'll never try it again. And that goes for him and me and his home folks, too.

Another thing is that, with the Time Transformer, we can't *have* home ties like other people. I suppose you know how it works.

According to where you've been, you may come home for your five-trip leave and find it's 50 years later than when you were there last, and the girl you had a yen for then is a grandmother. Or it may be 20 years earlier, and the senior dispatcher who shipped you out is still in school. Time's all scrambled for us, wobbling back and forth like that, and the only ones who are geared to that kind of life are other scouts, wherever they came from originally.

In other words, we may be as unlike as can be physically, but psychologically we're all the same kind. We're all that's left in the universe of the adventurers, the ones who take a chance, the gamblers, the explorers—the kind of people who on Terra, for example, once used to run away to sea or go on Crusades or join the Foreign Legion. I don't mean that all us scouts are just dear little birds in the nest together—don't you think it. I had a damned Aquilan pilot once—oh, well, forget it: he's been washed up a long time now, after some of us reported the things he did to us.

Anyway, as I said about two light-years back, it's awfully rare to find a bonus planet. We've had the Time Transformer now for nearly 300 years, and in that time

all the scoutships together have found just 47. And now here was this place, right up near the North Galactic Pole.

When we'd checked all the instruments, after we'd circled the planet east to west and north to south for over-all inspection, it seemed probable that three different races of Galfed members could live comfortably on it—Terrans, vermoids from Xo's planet around Capella, and reptilians from Planet IV of Rigel. And by a miracle we had all three kinds right there with us. Our co-pilot, a nice old gal (sure we have female scouts—why not? There's no sex problem when all the crew members are of different species) was a Rigelian, there was Xo, and there was me.

There wasn't a single sign of any planet life higher than a shrub, or of any animal life at all, let alone intelligent or civilized inhabitants. If ever there was a virgin planet, all set for colonization, apparently this was it—and we'd found it.

It was a little larger than Terra, its sun a yellow type like ours—a good bit larger, but the planet was farther off, so that equalized things. It was an oblate spheroid, also like Terra (and incidentally like Xo's and Harin's home planets

too), and it seemed either to be in a perpetual spring or to be in the midst of an interglacial period, for there was no ice even at the poles. Pressure, gravitational pull, atmospheric constituents, everything our instruments reported, clicked.

So our pilot—one of the best, even though he's one of those startling amorphous Vega people—decided to pick out a good place to land and send the three of us out for a week's experimental Sustained Experience.

Maybe I'd better explain that. The usual procedure in the rare cases when a bonus planet is located is to turn in the data to the Colonization Bureau. Then they send in a pre-col expedition of about 25 of the appropriate race, who start a rough settlement and stay for a year, to make certain the place is suitable for permanent colonization. (The scouts get their bonus right away, though.) That's what is called Sustained Experience.

Of course we weren't going to stay a year, and neither did we have the equipment a real pre-col group would have; but our pilot—I'll have to keep on calling him that, because his own name is something between a grunt and a snort—made up his mind to

take advantage of this unusual situation—three of his crew who could live on the planet without breathers—and speed things up for Colbur by reporting at least a week's first-hand experience outside the ship.

So we three piled out, calling back happy insults in basic Galactic to the unfortunates who had to spend the week marking time while we camped out. If you could call it camping—we didn't have to bother about either shelter or food, for we were to go back one at a time to the ship for our meals and to take turns at night to go there and sleep.

We were ordered to stay within view and within easy reaching distance of the ship, of course; no instrument is infallible, and funny things can happen on a strange world. For all we knew, an army of rightful inhabitants might suddenly march out of the bushes on us. All you can tell for sure from the air is that there are no towns, no roads, no buildings, and no aircraft. And scout orders are strict: if any kind of apparently dominant race appears, get out of there right away and let Liaison take care of it. But not so much as an insect showed its face on land, and the nearest rivulet seemed utterly devoid of plant or

animal life.

It was just a delightful spring day on Terra. Not that I'd call it a pretty place: it wasn't. Our circumnavigation had shown how featureless the whole globe was—no real mountains at all, just a lot of rolling hills with shallow flat valleys between. And no oceans; just an interminable series of narrow rivulets threading the valleys in all directions. No true forests—we'd checked on that particularly, because of the shock Galfed got when those highly intelligent Tree People were discovered on Persius III—just miles on miles of low thick shrubbery bordering plains covered with sparse, tough, brown grass. I'd describe the whole surface of the planet as a sort of moor.

That meant, of course, that there wouldn't be wood for fuel or building, also that there weren't going to be any native crops susceptible to modification as food-stuff. But that's Colbur's headache; if colonists can breathe and walk on a planet, Colbur will do the rest to make it habitable.

Our lady co-pilot set to work earnestly and determinedly, but Xo and I acted like a couple of kids playing house. Because we hadn't any real outfit, the pilot had told us to go through the

motions instead, and we did—pretending to unload equipment and set up a temporary warehouse for perishables and put up an imaginary field-kitchen and imaginary tents; and we joshed and rough-housed all through it. Of course we did have some real jobs to do—boring holes to collect soil specimens, collecting plants of every variety, scooping up containers of the water, testing for indications of minerals or coal or oil.

"Now if it just doesn't rain for a week, we'll have a real picnic," I called to the others. I forgot our intercoms were on, and I got an acid razz from the pilot for that one. "I hope it does rain," he said sweetly. "And you delicate shantafir" (that's an evanescent Vegan plant) "needn't expect to come in out of it, either."

Xo made a face at me—meaning he wiggled his antennae—and we left Harin sinking rods for soil specimens at the edge of the rivulet and tore out some bushes from the nearest clump, which we informed the pilot would serve as our shelter. Anyway, it didn't rain; a few clouds came across the sun once, but they soon disappeared. I took the temperature, and it was just 22° C. at midday, which is pretty nice.

Around the time when we'd been out some five hours by my terrestrial watch, Xo suddenly straightened up from digging a latrine behind the bushes and yelled: "You two come and help me, darn it! I've been working till I'm hot enough to melt my integument."

"Like fun!" snapped Harin. "I'm hot enough myself to fry eggs on my back." Those cold-blooded reptilians feel temperature changes a lot faster than we do.

And then I got a jolt. I hadn't been working, like the others—I'd been giving myself a little rest and a pipeful of Venerean gormuc in our lean-to shelter where they couldn't see me from the ship. Five minutes ago I'd just been comfortably warm. And now I found myself sweating like a Spican slime-beast. I ran to the thermometer. It registered over 40—around 105 if you still use the old Fahrenheit scale.

I signaled the pilot and told him.

"Good," he said cruelly. "That's the sort of thing you're out there to check on. We're not recommending any planet where the temperature rises regularly beyond reasonable tolerance. Stay out there and keep reporting. All

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of you can stand it if it doesn't go much higher."

We stopped exercising and huddled in the shade near the thermometer. Maybe this wouldn't invalidate the place for Harin's people, but if it was often as hot as this in the shade, then Xo's and mine were out as prospective colonizers.

In the next hour the temperature climbed to 48° C.—around 120° F. Xo and I were gasping, and even Harin wasn't doing much in the way of moving around. I called the ship and asked if we couldn't come in.

We got reluctant permission, spiced with jibes. We dragged ourselves to our feet—all of 20 of them, for Xo—and started to creep back.

And then all of a sudden—wham! the temperature dropped without warning—forty degrees. One minute it was ghastly hot, the next it was freezing. We made it the rest of the way to the ship, but fast.

The pilot looked worried as we trooped in with our report—if you can tell when a Vegan looks anything.

"This is still well within the tolerance limits—it could drop 40 degrees more without harm to you Solarians and Rigelians, anyway,"

he said. "And I doubt if it will drop much more, with no sign of snow or ice anywhere on the planet. But no race I know of could stand such abrupt immediate changes of temperature."

"However, we'll watch it some more. Xo, you stay in for a while. You others, get some warm covering on you and go out and check again."

So Harin and I had to wrap up and set off, with Xo cocking his antennae at us, and the other two crewmen jeering at the "picnickers." It probably didn't hurt Harin any, with her thick crocodilian hide, but I couldn't stop shivering.

There were drops of moisture on every blade of the tough sparse grass that covered the moor, and on all the thick, close twigs of the sagebrush-like shrubbery. No wonder I was shaking, with my feet sopping wet.

And then suddenly I realized that everything else around me was shaking too, from the instruments we had planted to Harin herself. I glanced at the ship. It was rocking as if it were on an ocean.

Then the whole moor began to roll in big shuddering heaves. We couldn't keep our footing—even Harin, with her four big paws.

The pilot called to us to come in at once, and we didn't need the order. But we had to make it crawling—we couldn't stand.

It took us nearly five minutes to get the 30 feet. And twice before we reached the ship there was an extra sharp heave punctuating the rolling motion, and we heard a noise like something creaking or groaning underground.

Believe me, I was glad to see that lock shut behind me!

"I'm taking her up," the pilot decided. "We'll go around to the other hemisphere and see how things look there. There certainly weren't any indications of vulcanism."

Our previous circumnavigation had shown the two hemispheres practically identical geographically. We landed early the next morning on an exactly similar moor threaded by rivulets, after circling around till sunrise; and again Harin, Xo, and I were the doves sent out from the Ark. We hit one of the hot spells—even worse than the day before; it was like walking into a blast furnace. We scrambled back in a hurry.

An hour later I was sent out alone. It was chilly and damp again. Then before I could plant the thermometer another planet-

quake broke without warning. The tremors went on interminably; and twice, as I staggered back to the ship, came that sudden sharp heave and then the ominous crackling sub-terranean sound. That ended it.

"For all we know," our pilot said, "we've just happened on a unique catastrophe. Perhaps normally this planet is the ideal place it looked like when we arrived. But we can't take any more chances, and under the circumstances I certainly couldn't recommend it for colonization. What do the rest of you think?"

Technically, of course, the pilot is the boss of a scoutship, as of any other, and he didn't have to ask our opinion. But anybody in authority over scouts learns pretty soon to handle things in a democratic manner or prepare for trouble. (That Aquilan pilot I was telling you about, for instance.)

So we took a vote, and it was five to one to call the expedition off, bonus or no bonus. The only dissenter was our Deneb V marsupial—and everybody knows how undeviatingly acquisitive *they* are. Our sixth crew member was from Aldebaran VI, and they're a robot-run civilization anyway, so chances for an individual bonus meant

INSIDE STORY

nothing whatever to him.

So our pilot flowed into operating shape, and we got the hell out of there before more quakes tore us to pieces. We were all pretty glum. We felt much worse than if our hopes had never been aroused in the first place.

There was nothing we could do about it; we had to call it a tour, and return to our base on Altair V. We'd learned once more that you can't tell about a planet by looking at it from the outside.

And there went our bonus.

Suddenly he was ill. Fever flooded him, chills froze him. He was clammy with cold sweat, he shivered, he was racked with fits of coughing.

No reason for his misery oc-

curred to his dreaming mind, for lack of experience made him incapable of comprehending the invasion of his organism by germs of sickness from outside himself. All he could do was suffer and endure.

After a time the discomfort began slowly to subside. This too he underwent without perception. The disease had come upon him suddenly, and now gradually it left him to be incorporated into the vast store of his half-memories. He had been sick, and now he was well again. By no doing of his, the germs had been eliminated.

Eventually he must die, as once he had begun to live, but that too he did not realize. Life continued within him, neither happy nor unhappy. He WAS.

In GAMMA 1, George Clayton Johnson was well represented with his memorable story of the near future, *The Freeway*. Reviewers around the country decided this story was a gem among gems, so we considered ourselves fortunate when George wrote *The Birth* for us.

On a small handful of stories and screenplays (*Ocean's 11*, *the Lemonade Squad*, *Icarus Montgolfier Wright*) and television (*The Twilight Zone*, *Route 66*, *The Law and Mr. Jones*) he has managed to build for himself a reputation equal to many who have been in the field for years.

In our search for more autobiographical material, we ran into a snag. George had locked himself in his room.

"What's he doing in there?" we asked his lovely wife Lola.

"One never knows," she said with a sigh. "Maybe he's writing, maybe he's painting — maybe . . ."

"Painting?" we sensed a lead. "Painting what?"

"Anything that will stand still," she said compassionately. She led us through the house. The front door was a surrealistic nightmare. The bedroom wall was a rose-colored mural. "George doesn't like to just sit at the typewriter and think out an idea. He claims the typewriter glares at him and makes silent noises. So he gets out his brushes and paints designs on the walls, doorknobs, sinks — anything in sight. When I go to sleep at night and George is working late, I never know what the house is going to look like in the morning. One day he painted a heart on the toilet seat."

"What else is he working on," we asked, "storywise, that is."

"Oh, he's doing a regular column for one of the men's magazines, and a *Mr. Novak* television script, and putting together a collection of his short stories."

We never did find out what he was doing in that room, but if the result is anything like the story that follows, it'll be well worth the effort.

THE BIRTH

George Clayton Johnson

He was lifted up into the lightning. Thunder cracked like kettledrums in his ears, loud, and yet far away, echoing and muttering.

The sudden whiteness that illuminated his eyes behind the closed lids was the lightning; the harsh rumble that trembled the deep-

THE BIRTH

sunk bones of his body was the thunder.

With these twin shocks consciousness came. It was like being unwrapped from a dense soft cocoon; like coming up from green ocean depths and yet not like these things at all. For several minutes he swayed in the murky darkness before he became aware of the cold rain.

It sliced against him in a pounding torrent, striking his skin, drenching his clothes. It sluiced onto his face, stinging and chilling him. He was rocked in a cradle of wet discomfort aware only of the rain and then he heard the wind.

It howled about him, gusty, turbulent, a maniacal scream of driven air, whistling and snorting against him, buffeting the cradle so that it creaked and sang and hummed.

The lightning flared again, bright, bright, making his eyelids crawl and he tensed himself against the tympani of concussion to follow. Thunder rolled and then there was only the rain, the wind and the vast, unbodied, pitching to and fro.

He began to feel fear.

He wanted to open his eyes but couldn't.

Then, far away, mixed with the din of moving air and rain, he

heard a faint creaking sound; the sound of iron against iron that a wheel might make as it turned slowly. Like a blade whetted against stone. Like a pulley unwinding against a great weight. He felt himself sinking down and down.

He became aware of the deep slow pound of his heart. His mouth tasted dead, hard, dry. His nostrils filled themselves in slow bellows movement and he could distinguish each scent: The smell of wet wood and iron, rusty in his nostrils. A compound of soaked wool, hair and leather. The sulphurous smell of burning ozone and something else, unidentifiable. A brassy smell of darkness, nightmares and death.

It was as though his body was a thing apart from him; a stiff weighty appendage to his true self. He was clamped and stayed against movement. He tried to be aware of his body but all he could feel was a leadness of hand, a heaviness of foot, removed from immediacy.

Where am I? he thought. He tried to remember where he had been, what he had done. Is this a dream or do I lie wounded in some cold and rainy forest, weakened and dying? The rain seemed real. The thunder and lightning

were presences, distinct though distant. He wanted to cry out for help but his throat was clogged and his tongue lay in his mouth like a dead thing. His lips were stiff and his face felt cast in stone.

The swaying lessened and he sensed that the rain had stopped. The surging wind had died.

The dream grows, he thought. It grows and changes and bears me with it.

The blood crawled like slow caterpillars beneath his skin.

He smelled stone, cobwebs, dust — dank and fetid.

Tis no forest, he thought. I inhabit a cell. But for what crime am I imprisoned? What foul thing have I done to be treated thus? And from where comes the rain? And why can't I move? Why are my eyes sealed and why am I bound? He cast about for answers to the questions, trying to remember, staring to recall the past.

At first, blankness like a dim roiling fog, featureless, and then wisps of memory came into view, disjointed, without beginning or end: A knife clutched tightly in his hand. Sun on a slope of ground and green trees in the distance. Hunger and a darkened room smelling of pork and ale and an innkeeper, full stomached, with fat hanging jowls and secretive eyes.

The clink of gold coins in a leather pouch. A cry. A pound of heavy feet and overpowering terror. Tight hands upon him. Kicks. Oaths ripped from throats and pain and blackness.

A cell, he thought. They threw me asprawl in a cell tended by a jailor with one eye, evil in his face, who brought me gruel in a wooden bowl and sometimes dark bread flung in the dark dust.

And here I am, he thought. Trusted, bound waiting the judges, waiting the sentence.

The memories grew clearer, became etched pictures crowded with detail, colors, movement: Two surly guardsmen flanking him while he labored with his chains. A dim hall and a clearing of throats. A judges bench, high, awesome. A tall cadaverous man with lace at his throat dressed in a dark cloak. Whispering voices and glittering eyes peering at him. A woman, bent with years, in a filthy brown garment. A squeaky, quarrelsome, vindictive voice, heavy with accusation. More whispers. A pointing of fingers. A sonorous droning. The guards again, shoving him forward. The heavy slam of a book closing and then his legs giving way beneath him while arms tugged. A dragging walk through a yellow clay field.

THE BIRTH

His hands bound behind him in the shadow of black scaffolding. The warm rusty taste of fear in his mouth. A blindfold across his eyes, then hands leading him up, up. The feel of a rope, rough against his throat. A redness. A reeling. A crying out. And at last, an endless fall into blackness.

He shuddered at the memory. I was hanged, he thought. I was bound and sentenced for my misdeeds and hanged. And yet, was I? Am I not here in the cell? Or is this the nightmare dreaming that comes to condemned men in their final hours?

His eyelids seemed hung with heavy weights as he fought to open them.

Or is this hell? Oh, God, am I in Hades awaiting the flames?

And still his eyes remained closed.

At his elbow he sensed movement. Something pressed against him and he heard breathing nearby. He heard heels twisting on echoing stone and felt hands upon him.

He strained stiff muscles to move. Slowly his right hand responded to his will, twitched, flexed, his fingers curled slightly. Something broke within him and he was able to open his eyes.

A man in a white smock bent

over him probing with an instrument at his chest; a square faced, elderly man with heavy brows and a prominent beaked nose.

"Ah," the man breathed.

He turned his head slowly to look at the man. I know him not, he thought, and yet it is as though I have always known him. He felt strength swell in him, growing.

Why am I here? Did the hangman fail in his undertaking and am I revived by a medical man? He looked about him trying to fit this room, this man, into a comprehensible framework. He saw glass retorts, strange tubes and wires, stone walls and a table upon which he lay. He saw iron clamps at his wrists and a thick band across his chest.

He tried to sit up but the bands restrained him.

"Ah," said the man. "*He lives!*"

He felt the hand on his brow and knew confusion.

And I was dead that he exhibits such emotion that I live? He tried again to rise.

"Easy," said the man. "Easy now."

He flexed his arm against the band at his right wrist, trying to free it. He tugged and strained. He tried to cry out, to plead for freedom, for mercy, but all he could summon forth was an in-

GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON

articulate cry.

Abruptly, the iron band broke. He waved the arm sluggishly in the air, undecided what now must be done.

The man fell back and briefly there was fear on his face. He regarded the form on the table. Resolve flickered across his face and he moved warily forward uttering comforting sounds. He came to the table and stroked the arm, crooning wordlessly.

The arm returned to its place.

"Do you understand me?" the man asked. "If you do, close your eyes and open them again."

He blinked his eyes closed and snapped them open.

"Ah."

He felt the man's hands, freeing the clamps, felt the table tilt upright beneath him and he was standing.

Slowly, ponderously he stepped away from the table.

They stopped before a tall reflecting glass.

He saw the man point at the mirror.

Is that me? he thought. Are those my hands? Is that my body? Are those my legs and this my face?

He wanted to run, to cry out, to protest. It can't be, he thought. I don't look like that. He stared at the overhanging brow, the eyes like gashes in the white face, the hooked nose and the great plain of wrinkled forehead.

He threw up his hands before him. He turned wildly to confront the man in the white smock. It can't be he cried. That isn't me! But even to his own ears the words were a glottal roar.

Oh, God, he cried wordlessly. What evil is this? He put his great hand clumsily to his chin as though thereby to dispell the horror, crying aloud to his creator.

It was then that he saw the metal studs, the electrodes protruding from his neck.

Later, he suffered himself to be led through the echoing corridors of Castle Frankenstein.

By that time he was quite mad.



MEATHERINGHAM

The Frankfort Book Fair where the following interview was conducted is a colorful literary bazaar which annually draws armies of publishers, literary agents and editors. Ivan Kirov (this is not his real name) an editor of a Moscow publishing house which publishes a good deal of science fiction had come to observe the goings on together with a sizeable delegation of Russian editors. Through one of those rare, unpredictable turns of fate (like Stanley meeting Livingstone or Dr. Johnson meeting Ben Franklin,) Kirov saw us carrying an advance copy of GAMMA 2 as we passed the rich, sensual array of colorful bookjackets from a score of countries. He stopped us in the midst of the international literary delicatessen and in excellent English asked to see the magazine. For ten minutes after browsing through GAMMA he asked many questions. Then it was our turn. Would he be kind enough to let us interview him for the next issue of GAMMA since there was substantial interest in America in the course of Soviet Science Fiction. He hesitated only a moment. As long as he could use a pseudonym, he saw no reason why we could not. For more than an hour over some excellent Rhine wine, we traded views about science fiction in our respective countries.

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Soviet Science Fiction

GAMMA: Can you tell us something of the genesis and development of science fiction in Russia?

KIROV: Apart from the stories of Prince Odoevsky in the early part of the Nineteenth Century I do not think there was any real science fiction produced in Russia until the eighteen nineties when the story *On The Moon* appeared.

The writer, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, is considered among us to be the father of soviet science fiction. In a true sense he was also the father of society science fiction. Tsiolkovsky was a very interesting man indeed and it's strange he is not better known. He used to work at his models and sketches of dirigibles and heavier-than-air

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machines and dream of the conquest of space. He foresaw the expanding population of Earth housed in great space-cities, self sufficient for food and drawing energy from the sun. He wrote of the sun's eventual death and the travel of the entire human species across the universe to other stars. In 1935, the year he died, he wrote that his earlier predictions about space travel were wrong. He had thought previously that hundreds of years would be needed to develop speeds necessary for interplanetary flight. In 1935 he predicted that flights into space would be possible in little more than twenty years.

His ideas stimulated the imagination of an entire generation of Soviet scientists and science fiction writers. Incidentally, a crater on the other side of the moon has been named after him.

GAMMA: Can you tell us more about him?

KIROV: He was basically a scientist who had to express himself in the science fiction medium, perhaps because there was no other way at the time to say the astonishing things he had to tell the world.

He worked in an obscure little town in Central Russia. In his stories he was a teacher I think more than an entertainer. His

stories are full of technical data which he takes great pains to explain to readers. He had a tremendous influence on our science fiction writers. I think you can find traces of Tsiolkovsky in any one writing science fiction in the Soviet even now although other influences have also entered into their work.

During the twenties, just after the Revolution, there was a great increase in science fiction and such foreign writers as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells were greatly admired and to some extent imitated. However science fiction was never really approved by the Stalinists who felt that detracted from the realism they demanded from Soviet writers. During the next thirty years comparatively little science fiction was published in our country.

Since Stalin's death, however a rebirth of science fiction has taken place and it is now much stronger than it ever was before. More novels and collections of stories have been published in the last few years than at any time since the nineteen-twenties. Last year saw the publication of the first Soviet magazine devoted largely to science fiction since the twenties.

GAMMA: How do you account

for the great upsurge of interest in science fiction in your country?

KIROV: I can think of at least three good reasons. In the Stalinist era publishing houses were compelled to stress fiction with political themes supporting and glorifying the Stalin cult. As a result many of our finest writing talents either wrote little for publication or wrote formula stories. Secondly, there has been an enormous interest in such themes as space flights and interplanetary travel since the flights of our Cosmonauts and your Astronauts and now the projects to reach the moon. Finally you must remember that during the Stalinist period a good deal of hunger for light reading was built up. There has been for so long now a relative absence of light reading matter in the Soviet Union. Comics, as you know them, do not exist for us, nor romances of the sort you have in your lending libraries or big general magazines. We have no detective or spy thrillers such as are quite popular in your country or the few that we do have are produced mostly for children.

GAMMA: So that science fiction satisfies this need for lighter reading matter?

KIROV: Of course. But you must not deduce from this that only

our lesser talents are interested in writing science fiction. On the contrary. Our stories which once were limited to new road-laying machines, new ways of diamond-mining, new combine harvesters, in short, new ways of glorifying the scientists and technologists who were building the five year plans, now are changing. When our first sputniks went up so did our science fiction stories and it is perhaps significant that *Andromeda* by Yefremov is our first science fiction novel in thirty years to describe a society on another planet. The first one in that time to give a comprehensive picture of a new world state as our writers envisage it.

GAMMA: Yes, that is an interesting development. But don't you think your science fiction writers still lean too heavily on technical logical stories — *Andromeda* is so overloaded with details of space gadgetry and the data of the flight that it often reads like a manual on space flights. It even has a glossary full of explanations of the numerous technical terms used, so the readers can follow the story.

KIROV: Yes, but there is also a love story which would have been frowned upon twenty years ago. You must be patient. I think our latest stories are beginning to ap-

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proach their western counterparts.

GAMMA: What is the status of science fiction in the literary scheme of things in the Soviet? Are your writers in that field respected or merely tolerated. Recently there has been a good deal of criticism leveled against writers and poets who follow western models.

KIROV: I think such criticism is dying down. Our science fiction writers have a certain amount of resistance from our more important literary journals but this is diminishing. For one thing we are now attuned toward a greater interest in space matters and secondly, many of our best science fiction writers are highly respected scientists in their own fields. I think we have a higher percentage of scientists who write in the medium than you do.

GAMMA: Can you name some of them and give their other professions?

KIROV: Valentina Zhuraleva, who is a doctor; Professor Ivan Yefremov, a fossil expert; Anatoly Dnieprov who is a physicist as well as a writer and the Strgatsky brothers, Boris and Arkady, Boris is an astronomer and Arkady is a linguist. On the other hand, Victor Saparin, another highly regarded science fiction writer, is a jour-

nalist. Stories by all of these are included in the several collections of Soviet science fiction stories which have appeared recently in Great Britain and the United States.

GAMMA: What are some of the differences you have noticed between Soviet science fiction and American?

KIROV: We are not especially interested in stories of mutations, time travel or supernormal powers of perception. You are fond of such themes, often treating them in a sociological manner; for instance dramatizing the persecution of a group of mutants, or their emergence as a dominant minority. Such stories may be interesting to us but they seem too implausible. There are other themes which I have noticed come up again and again among your writers and not our own. For example the difficulties of first contacts with an alien civilization, the consequences of differences in psychology; the clash between very different peoples, the exploitation of populations on other planets, religious or color conflicts.

GAMMA: Could you not sum this up by saying that Soviet writers do not write satires, and Soviet publishers do not publish them?

KIROV: Yes, I think you could

say that. We are interested primarily in the adventure aspect in new achievements. However when I say we are drawing closer I mean that we are no longer writing exclusively of physical adventures. The characters in our science fiction stories are now shown as people with emotions and problems. And we are not entirely avoiding the themes you use. For example, last year the Strugatsky brothers dramatized the kind of moral problem that is normally popular among yourselves: to what extent can an intelligent race's natural development safely be altered or accelerated by advanced outsiders? Two young Russians propose to import advanced civilization to a planet whose social structure is that of a primitive slave owning type. The fact that such a situation is shown to be a problem at all shows a big change over the old attitude. In the past even if we acknowledge that such a situation existed, our missionaries discussed changes in a utopian society such as Thomas More's *Utopia* or Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*?

KIROV: No I don't think so. But there are changes nonetheless. Soviet science fiction writers are more optimistic than yours are. They assume that other societies

will adopt our ideas would have have called for forces to liberate the alien peoples and all would have been sweetness and light afterwards. But basically Soviet Science fiction fulfills the same purpose among us that your thrillers do among your readers. We do not often turn to science fiction to solve or analyze social problems. However this may change.

GAMMA: Is American science fiction popular in the Soviet Union?

KIROV: Very popular. But even there the stories we like best are the ones that avoid political or sociological considerations.

GAMMA: What do you predict for Soviet science fiction in the future?

KIROV: Many more stories about interplanetary travel and the exploration of the universe. In general an emphasis on the science half of the term science fiction.

GAMMA: Do you see a greater number of novels?

KIROV: Yes *Andromeda*, our first important long science fiction work in decades has met with enormous approval both in the Soviet Union and other lands. Our critics and scientists were especially pleased with the accuracy of the scientific observations.

GAMMA: How about science

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fiction films and television programs such are becoming increasingly popular in America and Great Britain.

KIROV: Yes. Some of these are in the planning stage now.

GAMMA: You need not answer this question if you do not like it. Supposing the Strugatsky brothers or Yefrenov who are among your top science fiction writers were to write a satire or fantasy in which some of the values of your own would have either liberated the alien peoples by calling in some form of space troops and all would then have been sweetness and light. Slowly we are approaching the consideration of ethical, moral and social problems that are faced by many writers. Marxist society were questioned could it be published? Let us assume for instance that something as bold as Dr. Zhivago were submitted to a science fiction publishing house, would it be accepted and published without major blue-pencil?

KIROV: At the present time I think it would have more of a chance of being published than at any time since 1923. The reason is that the reaction against Stalinist censorship is still quite strong. We have much more open editorial board discussions, for ex-

ample, and allow ourselves a much greater leeway in choosing a manuscript. In point of fact one of the reasons science fiction is permitted greater leeway is that it does not or rather need not, as Pasternak's novel, point the finger directly at the government currently in power. Besides there is the fact that Lenin considered fantasy to be of great importance. It was Stalin who changed all that and we are now coming back to it. In the past year we have begun to publish a number of interesting fantasies and also stories about visits to other planets. To understand how much of a change this is you must remember that only a few years ago such magazines in the Soviet as *Literaturnaya Gazyeta* were attacking American science fiction magazines and their themes and now we are slowly coming to use the same themes. It may be a while before we have the kind of fantasy of Van Voigt's *The World of Null-A* or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* or that wonderful story by Robert Sheckley *The Academy* where the detection of deviates is determined by sanity meters . . .

GAMMA: Or Anthony Boucher's *Barrier* where we find a society which considers itself so perfect that any idea of change is ana-

thema and the state's function is to keep the Status of the Cosmos. Did you read that story?

KIROV: No, but I can see that such a situation would be unacceptable at the present time for Soviet readers. Do not misunderstand, I personally would like to see such stories. One of the stories I admire most of Bradbury's for instance is his *Usher II* with its use of Poe colors and details such as brass rats, robot skeletons and its Investigator of Moral Climate who bans all works of fantasy... In fact if I recall there is even a Society for the Prevention of Fantasy and a ban on all films except remakes of Ernest Hemingway.... I admire such a story, I can see its possibilities for social criticism among ourselves, but it is too soon to think of things like that... We discuss American and British science fiction stories quite often among ourselves of course—you would be amused at the intensity of such discussions and the positions that are taken. Sometimes our editorial meeting sound like debating societies in fact. In a way because of my own admiration for your science fiction I am considered a kind of rebel, editorially speaking. Politics does not, of course, enter into these debates.

GAMMA: Could you tell us more

about the positions taken on American science fiction at these discussions?

KIROV: Well, some of our editors feel that Western science fiction mistrusts man; that it cannot permit him to act without vandalism and brutality. His tremendous arrogance, rashness and war-mongering are often shown up by contrast with aliens of superior moral and intellectual stature. They insist that the dominant note of American science fiction is skepticism and distrust of all men whether they are scientists, politicians or even businessmen. Soviet man, on the contrary, they claim, is not afraid of the future. In Soviet science fiction, all problems of social integration can be solved and pessimism is shunned. This is one of the reasons that satire is not usually found in our science fiction stories.

GAMMA: What position do you take at such discussions?

KIROV: I feel that such an attitude is too good to be true. While I agree with some editors and writers that American science fiction is often pessimistic about human nature and that it insists too often that alien civilizations mirror your own, I think that an attitude of self-questioning would be good for us. I feel we could

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use more stories like let us say *The Space Merchants* by Pohl and Kornbluth, which shows the results of the mushrooming of industrial and commercial power and which is especially timely now with its company to develop the moon. I think such stories are needed and would be acceptable in our current climate of opinion.

GAMMA: Yes, but if such stories were to seriously question the values of your Marxist society, were in fact genuinely satirical toward contemporary values could they be published?

KIROV: It might be possible if the climate of opinion were permissive enough. We do have humor magazines which openly joke about institutions and persons in our society. But it is hard to say.

GAMMA: Isn't the real reason that Soviet science fiction cannot treat serious sociological problems the fact that science fiction is essentially the literature of change and would therefore be suspect?

KIROV: Yes I suppose that is so. But I prefer to think that we stress the themes we do because basically we are more optimistic about the changes the future will bring, about contacts between us and

other peoples. However, I do agree that a frankly hostile satire of Soviet life would not be favored by our leaders. Not even today, when freedom of expression is much greater than under Stalin.

GAMMA: Which American science fiction writers do you yourself like the most?

KIROV: Besides those already mentioned, I like Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton and Jack Finney among those writing now. But I will surely surprise you with the name of Edgar Rice Burroughs. I enjoy re-reading his space stories enormously and frankly it would be a change for the better if your magazines published more stories like them. I admire your fantasies and your time machine stories too but like most Russian readers nothing delights me more than a good exciting story about an expedition to another world.

GAMMA: Thank you Mr. Kirov. Would you mind telling us why you prefer to use another name since you say there is a more liberal climate of opinion in Russia.

KIROV: Simply because it would be embarrassing to me to receive any personal publicity in connection with this interview.

Raymond E. Banks was introduced to the s-f world in DYNAMIC SCIENCE-FICTION in 1953. Since then he has secured a reputation for himself in the field with several dozen excellent stories, many of which have been snapped up by anthologists who know quality when they see it. Ray is a graduate of UCLA, has taught creative writing courses, has been twice married and twice divorced, and has two sons. He has published two mystery novels, which have brought him much acclaim. Now living in Redondo Beach, California, a typewriter's throw to the blue Pacific Ocean, Ray also publishes a science news magazine for the 13,000 electrical/electronics engineers of the Los Angeles District, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, as well as acting as Executive Secretary of that group. His interest in the scientific is shown in this story, written especially for GAMMA 3, but in typical Banks' fashion his greater interest in humanity shines through.

BUTTONS

Raymond E. Banks

When the disaster lights lit and the alarm bells rang on the space ship I became one of that number of unfortunate humans down through the ages who find themselves facing sudden death—jerked from a relatively pleasant haze of living into a nightmare with only seconds, minutes left to live.

There were five of us aboard the MARQUETTE, three men and two women. I was John Burke, Chief Technical Officer, second

in command. We assembled rapidly in the pilot's house with Captain White.

"The oxygen unit has been destroyed by a large meteorite," he told us, speaking in a low, serious tone. "Also the reserve unit. We have only three useful space suits — and they can maintain life for only a dozen hours or so. These I have assigned to the ladies and to Dr. Wellen. We have radioed for help; frankly it can-

BUTTONS

not possibly reach us in time."

Four pairs of eyes gleamed at him in the seriousness of the moment. I think all of our lungs began to breathe shallow, and I felt my heart rate increase.

"There are, of course, the Bessemer units—"

There were the Bessemer units, the government safety device, the last refuge for those whose bodies could no longer be maintained in space. They looked like coffins; they were indeed refrigerator boxes which could maintain a body. But preserving a body was a secondary consideration. The Bessemer unit was designed to maintain the essence of the man, the personality pattern, that was all. They were seldom used and if used gave indifferent results.

"John Burke will, of course, continue to work on the oxygen units until the last possible moment," said Captain White and dismissed us.

Then Captain White chose the Bessemer unit and slid himself into its black, long shape with a head nod and a salute, a quiet, courageous man of space who looked as clearly upon calamity as upon the long line of successes of his many space-mapping expeditions.

Dr. Wellen scorned the Bes-

semeser device. He also scorned the handful of hours that were left to him in the space suit. He was an older man with a great deal of published work behind him, a family grown and a fortune established. He prepared his own injection, took it, and said "excuse me" when in the first mild convulsion he knocked the small bottle off the table; then he died.

I put on his space suit and kept working on the damaged oxygen compartments as ordered, both the regular and stand-by which had been smashed by the meteorite. It was hopeless but as Chief Technical Officer in charge of all machinery aboard it was my job.

The girls, Arlene and Myra, served respectively as the navigator and the recorder. Both of them scorned the Bessemer unit— women seem to — and Arlene went a little mad towards the end. I had to prevent her from hurling herself in the rocket chamber, but Myra sat down quietly and died, refusing the Bessemer device, and there was nothing more to be done about either of them.

It was my own moment of decision. To give up my body and become a synthetic intelligence sustained by artificial electromagnetic energy, or to accept death. I had a wife and children

at home. I had relatives, a place in things. I was reasonably young. The idea of the Bessemer was to preserve the body literally without oxygen and then later return the intelligence to it, but how well did it work? It was a subject I'd seldom heard discussed by spacemen — that was a bad sign in itself.

In action it provided a massive electrical charge to shunt the personality pattern onto a pre-conditioned matrix with an electro-chemical field, magnetized, and more or less tuned to the brain waves. This matrix consisted of an unattractive lattice of purple buttons, connected with delicate platinum wires. To go from being a reasonably handsome male, six feet tall, with plenty of hair and a youthful step to being a pattern of buttons on a flat surface simply didn't appeal. I felt the blood rush past my ears, not only from the approaching oxygen starvation but from the repugnance at my fate. I did not want to live without my body. I don't know what decided me — I think it was Captain White with his courage and his acceptance of the Bessemer unit as a humanly conceived and hopefully useful piece of disaster equipment.

I opened one of the caskets,

slid out of my space suit and into the receptacle, then pushed the button and felt the automatic machinery take over, rolling my body into the darkness of its internal workings . . .

Whatever problems regarding death remain to be solved, man has learned how to make the way out pleasant enough with his drugs and devices. Nevertheless, one expects one's death or even near-death in a government Bessemer chamber to be somehow significant and important.

All I remember is that my distress began to change to a feeling of euphoria and it was not dark, because, of course, the research psychologist would never have allowed the box designers to permit such a trauma to happen to one in the dark.

No, the light was a soft, cheerful orange. I can never forgive the makers of the chamber for masking whatever gas they used with a decidedly corny odor of mint, nor forgive them the determinedly cheerful music that went with the treatment. One should die in silence with all the dignity one can muster, not in a mint-flavored orange-lit music box.

Despite which both the gas and the music had their effect and I remember chuckling to myself,

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"Well, John Burke, this is quite a mess, isn't it?"

Then came the electrical surge; I was purple buttons lying on a piece of velvet, interconnected with the finest of platinum wires and my body was a frozen carcass. The MARQUETTE drifted lifelessly in space.

Dr. Lester Carroway was the physician in charge of my case when the derelict was properly rescued from space and the two Bessemer units containing White and myself were sent back to Earth. Carroway was a small, hawk-nosed man with a professionally rueful manner, given to pregnant pauses which sometimes helped and sometimes annoyed. He placed me in a laboratory box where proper drops of nutrient could occasionally be fed to the Pattern, as I was now designated.

"Although you are merely a consciousness residing in a matrix of nuclei, you're still a person," Carroway told me. Long pause. "The human tradition postulates maintenance of life to the last possible degree. Safety and precaution are also in the space tradition. Just as government insurance provides the workman on Earth with compensation and benefits in a bad accident which costs an arm or a leg, or an eye, the space

insurance will provide for you."

"Food, housing and recreation shouldn't cost much," I said drily as he came to one of his pauses. Even though I was now a pattern of purple buttons, I still thought of myself as humans do, a consciousness perched somewhere high in my brain above and behind my "eyes". I saw the world as a rather far-off window from a dimly-lit comfortable interior of the box, two feet square, one foot deep.

Dr. Carroway raised an arm. "Just as soldiers are provided with prosthetic limbs or artificial eyes," he said, "you will be given a robot to serve as your body until such time as we can transplant you back into your own body."

I had been able to survive so far by maintaining the illusion of a body, and an illusion of time with the exercise of my imagination. But it wasn't easy. "The first thing I need is instant sanity," I grumbled. "You can skip the robot. Just transplant me back to my own body and let me see my family."

"Of course," he said. "However, the biologists are still pre-conditioning your body and the prosthetic robot has not yet been delivered from the factory."

At least I could see and hear.

The black box I was in had a marvelous set of electro-mechanical switches which I could easily manipulate by thought process.

"Then give me some work to do," I said. "It's boring."

"I'll bring in your family," said Carroway, and I could see his determined fulfillment of the government manual on how to handle temporarily dis-bodied spacemen.

"Yes," I said in resignation.

"Hello, John!"

I could see the brushed-back tears in my wife's eyes. "Hello, Rita," I said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said. "How are you?"

"Not bad. How do I sound?"

"You sound, you s-s-sound a little flat!" Whereupon the good, honest woman burst into tears and fled from the room. Into space she'd sent a tall, rather handsome well-articulated man. From space she'd received a black box filled with purple buttons.

The children came in to see me, peering through my little window. This was not without its comical aspects, children being what they are.

"Which one is you, Dad?" asked Benny.

"All of them, son," I said.

"I guess we won't play football

this fall," said Teddy, the youngest.

"I guess we won't," I said. "Not this fall."

They looked so scared and uncertain that I ordered them: "Look into Dr. Garroway's smock — he has a sucker for each of you."

That helped and we eased them out of my hospital room. "Now, damn it, Carroway," I said, "I want to be put back into my body."

"Certainly," he said. Pause. "By the way, we did the transplant on your Captain White yesterday. It was not successful. We lost the force field from the buttons without reviving the body."

I'm afraid I cursed at that. I'd hoped the process was further developed. Dr. Carroway sat down and hunched his shoulders in a most unprofessional manner. "Sure we can do it," he said. "If we can get to the body at once, while everything is in pretty good working order. But a body that's been frozen in space for months and months —" He shook his head.

"I don't care," I said. "I want my body back."

"That's a very nice family you have there," he said.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that if I were you I'd stay right where I am — right with the buttons."

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I literally jumped at him, if the phrase is applicable. "There isn't anything wrong with my body is there?"

"No, nothing like that," he said. "It came through as well as any of them do — everything in place and looking perfect. But we only succeed with twenty-five per cent of the transplants and even with the successes we've had some brain damage resulting in idiocy." He looked at me in my box in such a hang-dog sorrowful fashion, as if he were responsible for the frailties of the medical profession, that I felt pity for him.

"Shall I wait?"

"I wish you would," he said. "We're expecting delivery on some new bio-medical equipment soon."

Every day my wife and family came to visit. Carroway with his narrow shoulders and sad expression spent more and more time with them, explaining the problem to my wife, taking the kids down to the nursery to play doctor. I appreciated his taking the time because it was painful to face them as a mechanical voice in a black box.

He waved a hand when I thanked him. "Never had much time for just plain visiting with folks," he said. Pause. "Worked all my life, every inch of it. I enjoy the visits."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to decide on the transplant," I said.

"Your robot finally came in," he said quickly. "John Burke Two. Looks a great deal like you, John."

John Burke Two did look like me, since they'd cast plastic molds from my body to make the android. He stood in the corner lifeless and awkward, like a huge gangling doll waiting to be played with. I began to practice with him. I was supposed to cast signals via the box switches to his transceiver and receive back his signals with sensations. Trouble was, I was really me, John Burke Prime, sitting eye-level and high in a block box in a medical lab, and he was over there. It was like having an untrustworthy twin.

"Raise your right arm," I commanded mentally.

His circuits buzzed helplessly. "Raise my right arm," I amended with resignation. He raised his right arm and sent a shelf of bottles flying through the air, because I had meant for him to raise his left arm; the orientation was bad. Dr. Carroway came into the laboratory a little grim-lipped and began to pick up the things.

"You shouldn't make such violent gestures," he protested.

"If you'd stop romping with the

kiddies long enough to pay me some attention it wouldn't have happened," I said, but he looked so crestfallen that I regretted criticising him.

I sent John Two down the hall to get a drink of water. As he drank and the signal was transmitted, I felt the cool clear liquid smooth, delightful in my throat. The trouble was that John Two didn't need a drink of water, being an android, and neither did I, being a Pattern. To enjoy the sensation was a game, like playing ping-pong — the makers of robots had forgotten the satisfaction of life-acts comes from the need to perform them. More usefully, I sent John Two out to collect my back pay and sick leave from the rocket company I worked for; that brought real pleasure because it was a necessary act — all of us could use the money. With the power supply I had, I could reach the robot on my private channel for many miles, so I had him stop in a bar I used to go to.

It delighted me no end that he completely fooled the bartender who never read the papers and was used to spacemen coming and going over the years. For a while I forgot I was a row of buttons in a box, and existed with John Two in the bar, smelling the sweet

smell of the liquors, sensing the grain of the bar, the cold of my glass, the murmur of the occupants. It was really jolly. The robot-makers had even allowed a certain amount of confusion in the circuits from the quick evaporation of the alcohol, so that my tongue got a little blurred. That was when I did something foolish.

"Where's John Two?" asked Carroway with what I thought a waspish tone, two days later.

"Down at the rocket port, I suppose," I said. "The other night he ran into an old friend in a bar. I mean, I did. Captain Oliver, private ship, taxi work between Earth and Mars. John Two signed on as crew."

"He can't do that!" cried Carroway. "He cost the government more than fifty thousand dollars."

"Look, Carroway. All my life has been spent in space. Fifteen years of it. You want to keep me happy? You're keeping me from my body. At least let me do some useful work, work I understand, through the robot."

"But your family — the wife and children."

"Can John Two take my wife out to dinner? Or spend an evening at bridge? He doesn't need food, nor do I. It bores me. As for bridge with his circuitry, me-

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mory units, there isn't a human bridge player in the world that would stand a chance. Play football with the kids? John Two could lick the best team that Notre Dame ever fielded — what fun is that for the kids? Besides — you seem to be enjoying my family well enough."

The last statement made Dr. Carroway sad. He went to the window and began picking at the cracks with a scalpel, his ugly thin face and big, bright eyes the saddest I'd ever seen.

"I'm only a friend of the family," he said in a tone that indicated it was the story of his life.

"Look, Carroway — my wife's out there now on her daily visit. Why don't you take her out to dinner, maybe a movie?"

"My place is here with you," he said.

Sometimes people can be dumb. "You misunderstand the whole thing," I said. "A human with a body needs a wife. A human with a body needs children, to tire his muscles and emotions with. A pattern of buttons in a box has different needs and desires."

When he'd gone sadly and hopefully, I felt sad too. I knew what I was giving up — all the things I was used to. Yet I had to face the fact that I wasn't quite human.

Not any more. One day the cat stops trying to bark like a dog and run after sticks.

There was a warm haze of the anesthetic, the tension of the operating theatre, the bright color of blood, the flash of the surgical instruments, the concentrated frown of the operating surgeon. There was the young girl on the operating table. An unconscious moan escaped her lips. The operation was going to be a success mechanically but the patient — her name was Beatrice — was going to die. She didn't want to live.

I crept invisibly through the warm circuits of lights, emphasizing the electro relays that I was capable of, looked down at her ugliness. I put an imaginary flash finger out into the circuitry of the anesthetic machine. Now I hovered six inches over her face staring down into the drawn, troubled countenance. It was like a man standing on a cliff over an abyss. I felt strong and capable with the voltage of the machine but I wanted with all the desire of my non-existent heart to leap the gap to the infinitely weak electro-mechanical circuit of the girl's brain. I wanted to, I urged, I made the connection and sank, sank deep in her mind, open in its unconscious-

ness. I felt the drugged, heavy sensations of her stasis. I sent the message, order, command, plea, cry: "Live!" I tried so hard that a blue spark shot out of the machine and made the anesthetist jump. My effort broke the circuits; I was back in a black box in the laboratory, three stories above, staring out of my little windows.

I immediately restored the connection through the electrical circuits on the walls, finding my way easily, after the practice I'd been getting.

Down in the operating room the doctors and nurses stared at each other in surprise.

"Machine shorted," grunted the attendant.

"Her pulse is better," said the nurse.

"Something happened," said the anesthetist. "I felt it. Something strange happened here."

Can a row of buttons in a box smile?

Beatrice lived.

That was how it began, and in my dim, dumb way I understood that it was a beginning never envisioned by the makers of the Bessemer unit, that the Pattern which they had laid out for convenience on velvet in a black box

with incredibly delicate wiring was a new form of life, more than a machine, and more than a human.

I was able to keep John Two on the space ship far away. And more, I was not only multi-channeled, I was infinity channeled, because the center of my brain no longer had to worry about breathing, heart-beats, skin temperature, muscle tone, bodily safety precautions, visual signals which amounted to so much noise for a being safely ensconced in a black box in the laboratory. So much of our lives are built to accomodate the soft shell of our frail bodies! Not for me! I was a pattern — simple sentience, electro-chemical in nature with the whole world of electrical circuits open to me.

Soon I traveled the electrical circuits to adventure outside the hospital, to catch the pulse of the business going on about me in the city, transactions, deals, successes and failures, pulling myself back with reluctance to my black box in the hospital.

"You don't listen to me," Dr. Carroway complained. "I'm trying to help you. To save your sanity."

I looked at the devices he'd brought me. John Three, another robot that had cost the govern-

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ment fifty thousand dollars, propped like a doll against the wall, even though I'd tried to refuse it. He was well-equipped to do crossword puzzles, automatic card games, read books, enjoy taped TV shows, play cards, all matters of interest to people with bodies. These no longer concerned me.

At that moment I was considering the sober ethics of a decision the Mayor of New York was about to make concerning the location of a new space landing field. The Mayor only dimly saw the impact of his decision on the lives of those in the city, today and now.

I was shocked at his lack of knowledge. And he was an intelligent man. But so much of his energy was devoted to digesting his lunch, worrying about his emotional life, satisfying his underlings and the Council — it was amazing that one-sixteenth of the knowledge he needed for a clear decision could be crammed into such a distraught brain.

As usual, he was making a decision for tomorrow's use based on today's technology. From development which I had garnered traveling the electric circuits around the city to certain labs and the university I could foresee that central mass space ships were not the wave of the future. Small

packages individually fired, interchangeable components not much bigger than a man would rise from the earth and by precise navigation not now available come together in space to form the final central-mass space ship. No such huge landing field would be needed at all in the future, yet the tens of thousands of lives would be uprooted, millions of dollars wasted to build the useless monstrosity of a space station.

The Mayor vetoed the building of the station. He based it on economics, but his decision came to him in a dream.

If you ever want to pop into somebody's mind, try them in sleep sometime.

"Razzer blaugow tensplan," said Dr. Carroway.

I had maybe a hundred fingers of consciousness along various electric circuits out in the city, some in the state, and had run one circuit to Washington. The growing Pattern was passing rapidly through its grade school training.

"What's that?" I asked Carroway absently, part of me back in the lab.

(I was at a funeral on the lower East side, part of me, a very special funeral with Shakespearian overtones of incest and nobility. It was a new experience

that I needed, for I was crammed with a need to know all about human experiences and emotions, by which the sentient universe operated, without this precise knowledge I could not understand.)

"I said — are you ready for your transplant?" said Carroway.

"Transplant?" I asked Carroway dreamily.

Dr. Carroway shook my box. "We must do the transplant," he said. "All the new equipment is here. You have to be transplanted back to your body."

"No hurry," I said.

"I'm afraid there is," said Carroway.

I looked at the sharp narrow face and sensed the danger at once. There was a limit to the time that his bosses would let him spoon-feed me. There was a limit to which a bodied human would tolerate a non-bodied human, a Pattern.

"I'm not ready," I said.

"You'll have to be ready," said the good doctor shortly. I did a quick reading of his mind, my sense of danger arising. Yes, he was under pressure from his bosses, from his own emotions. He wanted to take my place with my family but his morality prevented. I could not be expected

to resign the family which I could not care for to him — but if I died he could marry the widow in respectability.

Using electrical current I could take care of Rita and the children with about one-sixteenth of one button of energy, popping into her mind to help the decisions, babysitting the children much better than a bodied human if need be, by my foresight and quickness. In fact, I'd been doing this subconsciously all along.

But Dr. Carroway had to do the transplant, subconsciously intending it to fail. I did a nanosecond's calculation as to my own future, but I knew the answer by instinct. I still had a physical existence. My sentience depended upon eighteen purple buttons sitting on velvet in a box in a medical lab. I was at his mercy.

"Soon, very soon," I said placatingly.

"Tomorrow," said Dr. Carroway. "At three p.m."

I sent a quick-running energy finger down into the cold vaults in the basement to open some circuits and destroy my now-useless body so he could not transplant me.

I was cut off!

The narrow sly face smiled at me through the small window in

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my box. Carroway knew or suspected what had happened.

"I enjoy this state," I said in misery, knowing the danger of the admission.

"It's happened before," said Carroway. "Never as completely as with you. Apparently the Bessemer was a superior unit and it caught a good magnetization when it bumped you onto the buttons."

"And so you have the rule of the forced transplant," said I.

He nodded. "Even if you could destroy your own body, which you can't because I've shielded it electrically, we'd find another for you. The Bessemer plan insists that a mind cannot exist without its body.

I didn't argue. I watched sadly as he put out the lights in the laboratory and cut off my box, reducing my circuitry to the merest fragment of the power I usually enjoyed. Probably I was the first Pattern ever to reach adolescence; the others must've been nipped off in their grade-school efforts to become truly adult Patterns. Probably they had fought wildly, futilely to preserve their Pattern lives, and had been demagnetized or exploded themselves by exposure to too much current.

I must think, think . . .

The ultimate moment had come. My body lay on the operating

table and the black box with the purple buttons across from it. It was three p.m. of the next day. I thought my former body looked poorly. I felt warm and friendly to it, but not attached at all, with its heavy demands on my mind to keep its canals, oceans, temperatures and equipments running.

I felt a wry, sad amusement at the mummary of the operating theatre — Carroway dressed in his best white smock, the surgeon in action, surrounded by serious, white-clad underlings, the worshippers of the body, with their sharp tools, drugs, dramatic poses. Dr. Carroway looked about him with a certain air of theatricality, aware of the crowd in the seats above him; then made a negligent gesture for the tomfoolery to begin, more dramatic because he was so offhand about it. He bent his narrow head and thin body to his task . . .

It was a failure, of course. It had to be a failure. Even if Carroway had wanted it to succeed it probably would've failed because the technology is not yet right. They restored all of the artificial life to the corpse, the pulse and heart beat, the temperature and stasis; then they lifted the row of purple buttons and tried by electrical means to shunt the sentience

of me over into that living humid, wasteful morgue of a body.

At one point I feared that Dr. Carroway would break one of the buttons; his scalpel grazed the surface of the white mints I had stolen from a patient in the maternity ward. If he cut into one of those eighteen sugary mints which I had dyed purple . . . For that matter the dye wasn't so good — under the demanding lights of the theatre they looked a little off-color to me.

John Three, my newest robot gift from the government insurance, stood in the corner because of some vicinity-magic believed in by some nurse who slept lightly and dreamed much. Inside the stomach of the robot rested all eighteen buttons of me, drawing the juice allowed the robot, folded and fearful, for I had to be there.

Then across the room I was properly dead as a bodied human. They stopped the machines, pulled apart the tables, drew a sheet over the cast-off corpse while the surgeons relaxed and went into the wash-up room.

I felt first of all a sadness. I would never have a body again — even an opportunity to utilize a near-corpse brought to the hospital by accident wouldn't be the

same. My past was dead and through. Way out in space light years from Earth I saw to it that John Two at the proper moment relaxed in his activities and slumped to the wall, a lifeless robot no longer under control of the Pattern back on Earth. I couldn't keep him going. If I did Carroway would know that I lived.

Yet I felt a rising sense of exhilaration. John Burke the human was dead, but John Burke the Pattern lived! As long as I remained inside of John Three I could survive. I had taken plenty of nutrient which I could command the robot to feed to the buttons. I could exist on John Three's current, cause him to be recharged, make my presence and intelligence felt by jumping to all of the complex electrical circuits throughout the world. I was the first of a new form of life, a Pattern — if they would let me live!

For good? For bad? Could there be others? A team? A colony? Mankind wouldn't like it. They couldn't imagine non-bodied humanity and neither could I. Whether I was sane or insane, useless or useful, a freak or the future — these matters could only be decided over a period of months and years. But right now I had to survive.

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There were only two clean-up interns left in the darkness of the operating theatre. They joked — one of them lit his cigarette by poking it in the eye of John Three and I wanted to cry out at the criminal depletion of my precious current. If I could only get John Three out of the theatre — the building — down on the street —

I started to move out of the theatre along the hall, down the back stairs towards the exit. A nurse looked at me curiously but I bowed and she let me pass. An attendant pushing a food cart jolted into me with a snarl, and I felt a piercing agony as the buttons, loose in the robot, jangled. The fierce pain lasted until John Three could reach inside himself and set the Pattern right again.

Then the robot and I moved down a long, long hall at the other end of which were frosted glass doors to the outside world, an evening sunset touching them with gold, a golden glow to signify the world of freedom for me outside.

Carroway stood in my way! In the corridor, there he was, in my way, as always. Waiting this time to take Rita and the family home.

Robots never move unless on some programmed assignment, or herded along by a human. My ro-

bot had no human master, nor any business to conduct in the hospital, now that John Burke was supposedly dead. Carroway shifted his shoulders in a belligerent fashion; I knew at once he understood what had happened. Yet there was nothing for me to do but keep on walking down that corridor towards the golden door and freedom.

For a moment I felt a surge of electrical strength — anger, a desire to crush him in my powerful arms and run out of the hospital. Neither he nor any human could stand against my power!

Then I let my current of rage drop as I walked towards him. There was no future in violence between the human and Pattern races. We were both reasoning beings — destruction is not reasonable.

"So you live," he said in a low angry voice as he blocked my way.

"I have to live," I said. "Mankind has changed the Earth, challenged the skies, swept the oceans of meaning. Yet there is an incredible amount to learn. Your body is a prison from which learning is hard. I am free to investigate the world."

"A race of Patterns could up-troy men."

"A race of Patterns could up-

lift men."

Our eyes met, wills locked. Suddenly he reached out to the robot John Three and flipped a switch. I felt the current to all its parts diminish and die. I felt the stillness of the loss of power.

"So it ends," he said. "I simply turn you off — you won't last. How long can the buttons survive without current? A few minutes? A half-hour? I'm sorry, John, but I can't take the chance."

Then he left me there to notify an attendant and pick up Rita and be on his way. The robot collapsed to the floor, a useless can of metal with a useless row of purple buttons which would simply fade, fade into nothingness. I heard his voice and laughter as he went to join Rita, heard their footsteps recede. I didn't have enough power left to watch them go, but I couldn't blame him. Men prefer the known to the dangerous unknown.

A shout of gleeful laughter, the harsh cry of a nurse, the sound of feet running, the impact of a small figure on the robot's body.

"Can I hide in you, robot? The nurse's after me!"

My youngest, Teddy, from the playroom. Hide and seek. Through the robot's sensors I felt his soft

breath, the silken touch of his hair.

"You can — hide in me —" I said. "Push — button — my back."

With excited eyes, with a child's delight in gadgetry, Teddy pushed the button that Dr. Carroway had turned off, the current flowed, power and strength returned; I rose with a surge of electrical life.

In a flash I opened the robot, small Teddy popped in, and when the pursuing nurse's aide came out in the hall looking for him she saw only a tall robot ambling towards a door made golden by the sunset.

I would like to have kept that small, breathing essence in the robot's body forever, for I was human and a father. But I knew I could not. I released him on the sidewalk, giggling with his joke, gave him a fond "goodbye" and watched him go, a small scurrying figure in the dusk, running back to his world, to bedevil the nurse's aide in the building.

"Not for you, Carroway," I told the trees, the land, the sky. "Not for Rita. Not even for myself, the dead John Burke. I live for Teddy and his generation, the rest to come who hope the most, play the hardest, believe in new ways —"



MEATHINGHAM

Ron Goulart, whose tale of the zany doings on Weldon is the funniest thing we've read in years, is a small swarthy man in his early thirties who wears glasses and a perpetual scowl. He has the driest sense of humor this side of Missouri and a knack for humor that has won him applause throughout the science fiction field. Actually, although Goulart's first SF yarn appeared in a national magazine over a decade ago and his stories pop up regularly in s-f journals, many people (including editors who buy his work) feel he doesn't write science fiction at all. They insist that Goulart simply writes humorous stories which are out of this world. We agree.

Aside from confusing s-f fans who never quite know how to pigeonhole him, Goulart has written for *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *MAD*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, *SHOW* and *1000 Jokes*. A graduate of UCLA, he has spent several years writing advertising copy, including radio and TV commercials for beer and dog food. The next time you rip off the cover of your wheaties or cornflakes box you may be wrecking a message that has kept him in fresh typewriter ribbons for months. At this writing, our noble jester, having been nearly frozen to death by spending several icy weeks in Manhattan, is now sitting on his porch in sunny Los Angeles in Bermuda shorts as he pounds his word box.

SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION

Ron Goulart

Chief Coordinator
Space Surplus Warehouses, Inc.
Surplus Square
Keystone, Barnum
Dear Chief:

Yes, there is an explanation for why the gross of wicker temple urns can't be sold. And it's not that my surplus outlet here on Weldon is the newest one in your group. What happened happened because of the Housewife Hussars and a

semi-retired arch criminal and a girl named Marina. You'll probably be getting other reports on this. But let me clarify.

Roughly two weeks ago I was, as I gradually awakened, watching the android window washer scooting up the side of the three story blue glass office building across the clearing. Then it occurred to me that when I had turned in the night before my Space Surplus

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Outlet Store had been the only building within a mile.

Another android came out on the roof of the newly arrived building, constructed a flagpole and ran up a flag. I couldn't make out the lettering on the flag and I was going to get a pair of surplus Saturnian trinoculars from the store when I remembered I was sold out on that item.

From out back a horn sounded. I blanked my windows, since I now had neighbors, and got up. My delivery half track honked again and then drove into the side of the unloading platform. I showered and shaved and dressed. Then I went out to help stack the latest surplus.

Sitting on the splintered platform were five cartons. But I didn't see Hobie, my driver and assistant. "Hey, Hobie," I called. One of the cartons teetered and then toppled. I ran across the red graveled ramp and swung up on the platform. Hobie was wound up in thick yellow rope, kicking with his fur booted feet. "This is some shipment," I said, dropping to one knee to undo him.

"Wait." A hand tightened around around my wrist. "It may be a trap."

"If it's a trap all it's caught is my assistant," I said. I looked up

at the tall slender blonde girl who had grabbed me. She was pretty, but she had on a tan colored uniform of some kind. Pants, belted jacket and well kept up boots. She wore a visored cap and the cap had a black and gold circle on it. She was also wearing two holstered blaster pistols.

"I mean," she said, "a trap to snare you and quite probably cause you serious harm. I'm with YGSPWC and I know."

I thought about the flag on the mysterious building and I squinted at her insignia. "Is that the YGSPWC building that just went up across the street?"

"Yes. We're on something of a low budget for Weldon and so we've had to build in this economical rent district. Although I understand Weldon is greatly decentralized and subdivided so there really aren't actual cities anyway."

I reached for Hobie and started on the ropes again. "Weldon will give you suburban living at its best. What does YGSPWC stand for?"

"Young Girls Space Police and Welfare Committee. And before you touch him look at this." She held out a spool of microfilm to me.

"Small print bothers my eyes. You tell me what it is."

"It's the criminal record of one of the most insidious men in this universe or any other." The girl stopped and inhaled. "I was really upset when I started going through Records and Identification, to fill myself in on what master criminals this area is noted for, and came across this."

While she talked I got Hobie loose. As he took out his gag I said, "And Hobie here is a master criminal?"

"I'm not certain. I became so distraught when I found this news out that I rushed over to consult with you. To warn you if you were not prepared and forearmed. When I came over I found this man trying to demolish your premises."

"That's just the way he drives," I said. "This is Hobie, my assistant."

Hobie twitched his small round nose. "She fouled me from behind and wound that silly rope around me, boss."

"Well," I said, "it's all part of getting to know your new neighborhood, Miss . . ."

"Sergeant Marina Hawley," the girl said. She reached out and brushed at Hobie's dusty jacket sleeve. "I didn't realize that this man was your trusted employee."

"Who is it you're so excited about?" I nodded at Hobie and he started hefting the cases into the

storage room.

"According to the latest YGS-PWC intelligence reports," said Marina, "one of the real arch fiends of the universe has settled about a mile from this spot. I didn't even know it until I unpacked my top secret documents this morning."

"Who is he?"

"None other than Henry Otis Zeffer." Her head nodded once for emphasis.

I grinned. "Zeffer? He's a retired old smuggler or something. Lives in an isolated place over by the ruins of the Weldonian temples. He's no threat."

"Did you know," asked the girl, "that Henry Otis Zeffer is known, in some circles, as the Father of the Death Ray?"

"No," I said. "He's always fooling around with something in his workshop I know."

"You've been there?"

"To deliver stuff he's bought."

"You may well have provided component parts for an infernal machine," said Marina. "Tell me, what's your name anyway?"

"Bob Dadigan, but I don't think you'll find a spool on me."

Hobie came over and handed me a bill of lading. "Wicker temple urns," he said. "From the back country of Peregrine. A gross of them."

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"Hey, maybe we can use them in our remaindered icon sale tomorrow," I said. "Better carry them into the store and unpack some of them. That mothers' group of Settlement #36 will probably be by for the sale. They like stuff like this."

"They bought up those Venuvian prayer wheels," said Hobie. "Two gross, remember?"

"I take it," said Marina, "you aren't planning to do anything as to Henry Otis Zeffner."

"He's been no trouble to me in the three months I've been here," I said. "By the way, how did you get your office up so fast?"

"YGSPWC uses a prefab-teleportation method."

"It's impressive," I said. "Waking up and seeing the YGSPWC flag unfurled. How many on your staff, Sgt. Hawley?"

"Myself and three androids," she answered. "Plus a large variety of deadly weapons."

"You should be safe."

"Now that law and order and well-organized charity have come to this part of Weldon," said Marina, "everyone will be safe."

"Have coffee with me?"

"Protocol doesn't allow it," she said. "And I don't think coffee does your liver any good so far as I've been told." She nodded and

walked away down the narrow steps off the platform and across the gravel and around the corner of my building.

When I went inside the store I found Mrs. Thaxton Nightcrest flinging pink leaflets in the aisles. "Mrs. Nightcrest," I said. "Be a sport. We still haven't found all the leaflets you tucked away on your last visit." I pointed down. "And your spurs are runneling the floor."

"The floor has an alien feel," Mrs. Nightcrest said. The fashion on Weldon for some of the more outdoor matrons is close cropped hair. When Mrs. Nightcrest removed her metallic riding hat and her head bristled at me it gave me an odd feeling. She said, "These are new leaflets, Mr. Dadi-gan."

"The floor is made from local Weldonian trees that I felled myself," I explained, taking the leaflets she'd snapped out at me.

"Despoiling our natural resources, too."

The top leaflet had only one word of copy: *Burn!* "This mean me?"

"It instructs your deluded customers as to just exactly what to do with products that are not manufactured on Weldon."

The other leaflet said: Buy Wel-

donian 100%! "Well you know, Mrs. Nightcrest, all the things in our surplus store here are imported from other, sometimes remote, planets. What with burning and boycotting I wouldn't do much business."

"A policy that the Housewife Hussars are in favor of."

"Hussars now? Aren't you the Housewife Marching Brigade anymore?"

"We acquired mounts."

Hobie entered now, lugging a crate of the Peregrine wicker temple urns. He smiled at Mrs. Nightcrest and began unpacking.

"You still," I asked Mrs. Nightcrest, "hold the rank of Commander-in-Chief?"

"My title has been expanded to Mounted Commander - in - Chief." Her voice dimmed away and she was impelled over to Hobie's side. "What now?"

"Wicker temple urns," Hobie said, setting one out on a cleared shelf. It was an ugly yellow thing, brittle, with a handle that seemed askew.

"That's the last straw," said Mrs. Nightcrest. "Burn those heathen receptacles at once."

"They're going on sale tomorrow," said Hobie, putting out another one.

Mrs. Nightcrest returned to me.

"Burn the urns. Or . . ."

"Or?"

"The Hussars will ride." She took a significantly deep breath, jammed her helmet back on and handed me a bundle of leaflets. "I'm too angered to distribute the remainder." She left.

"Short-haired women," said Hobie. He widened his eyes and watched me. "Well?"

"Unpack that crate and bring the others in and put them back of the counter," I said, filling my pockets with the Housewife Hussar literature. "We have to tie them in with our marked down icon sale. I'm going to get this outlet into the list of top ten surplus outlets."

"You think these urns will do it?"

I watched them being lined up. "They look repulsive enough to become a fad." I shook my head and started pacing among the shelves. Mrs. Nightcrest had dropped her leaflets into two dozen of the surplus Venusian zombie-blown stirrup cups and I had to fish each one out with one of our popular Murdstone pseudoplastic assassin pikes.

"Who are those hussars she mentioned?" asked Hobie.

"New improved version of the Marching Brigade," I told him. "I

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didn't hear her galloping away just now so I'm not sure exactly what they're mounted on."

"Could be most anything on this damn planet."

I made up my mind. "I know what I'm going to do."

"Get that lady police officer to stand guard while we have our sale?"

"Marina Hawley?" I shook my head. "Nobody pays any attention to the Young Girls Space Police and Welfare Committee. That's why they come out to these obscure planets to practice."

"What then?"

"I'm going to talk to that guy who heads up the Government Board for this territory. What was his name?"

"That's right," said Hobie. "That board's about all the official government there is in this area." He rubbed at his nose. "Donald I recall the news said."

"Donald Skindip," I said, remembering. "He's got headquarters about thirty miles from here. I'll drive over and lodge a formal complaint. Get Mrs. Nightcrest to cease from molesting us. After all, we have lots of loyal customers. Everyone can't be in a Buy Weldonian mood." I went purposefully out into the morning.

In my hallucination a blonde

girl dropped out of the trees and used some kind of stun gun on a man who had introduced himself as Kid Shots Swanley. The blonde girl also stunned Kid Shots' three large sidekicks.

There were some androids, too. Androids with YGSPWC stencilled on them in various places. I somehow was flat on my back and seemed to be bleeding slightly from the nose and to have a left eye that was settled in a permanent wink.

As the blonde girl bent over me I realized that I was not suffering from a hallucination at all. I was coming to after having been jumped and beaten by Kid Shots Swanley and his gang.

How had that come about? Earlier I had spent a friendly hour with Donald Skindip, a smooth skinned copper colored man with a blond hairpiece. He had admitted right off that although he was, besides being Chairman of the territory's Government Board, also the President of the Weldon Manufacturers Committee he did not believe in the excessive practices of a group like Mrs. Nightcrest's. He did, however, think it might be a good idea to have a moratorium on the whole ticklish situation and close down the surplus outlet until tempers had calmed. I

told him it was certainly something to think about and took off.

On the drive home, when it was nearly twilight and I was some ten miles from the surplus outlet, the Swanley group had materialized. They were all standing in the roadway in a section thick with trees. It was a pretty desolate place to run into hitchhikers, especially ones so aggressive.

When I'd stopped and pointed out that they were blocking the way the leader had introduced himself and then expressed a point of view somewhere between that of Mrs. Nightcrest and Donald Skindip. Then they pulled me out of the truck and the fight started.

"I warned you," Marina was saying to me now, propping up my head. "You know too much and hence this attempt to do away with you."

"Know too much about what?"

"Why, Henry Otis Zeffler, of course."

"Now look, Sgt. Hawley."

"Since, as part of my routine patrol, I've saved you, you can call me Marina. It's a YGSPWC custom."

"Good, Marina. Call me Bob. And then put me back in my truck."

She turned and said something to the androids and they gath-

ered up the Swanley bunch and carried them away into the underbrush. "My assistants will use the YGSPWC cruiser to take those assassins back to the office for detention and questioning. I'll drive you."

"Go with your friends," I started to say. I passed out and it took some of the force out of the remark.

I elbowed up in my bed and looked at Marina, who was just coming back into the room. "You're out of uniform."

She was wearing a light blue skirt and a sleeveless blue blouse and her hair was down. "It's after hours," she said. She was carrying one of the wicker temple urns, now filled with some pastel colored flowers. "I borrowed one of your baskets to put these in. Flowers brighten a sickroom."

I felt my head. "You put on the bandages?"

"Both police work and charity," she said, "call for a thorough knowledge of first aid." She placed the basket on my bookcase top. "You've been muttering Nightcrest and Skindip."

"Some people I know."

Marina sat carefully on the edge of the bed. "While you were sleeping I listened in on the preliminary questioning of those

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hoodlum assassins. The names Nightcrest and Skindip were mentioned."

"Sure," I said, "Mrs. Nightcrest and Chairman Skindip probably told those guys to work me over."

"I wish," the girl said, "that those lawyers from the Government Board hadn't negotiated the release of Mr. Swanley and his associates. Now we can't learn how this is all linked up with Henry Otis Zeffer."

"It's not," I said, sitting up. "Lawyers came for those hoods?"

"Yes, while you were resting."

"That's fine. We've got the sale coming up tomorrow and now I have to worry about Kid Shots Swanley lurking around."

"I don't think he's in the mood to make trouble," said Marina. "When I gave you your evening meal I also gave you something to calm your nerves. It should be taking effect soon. So good night, Bob."

"Thanks, Marina." I fell asleep.

The sneezing woke me up. I hit the light button and looked around the room. The wicker urn wasn't an urn anymore. It was a little slick yellow guy about two feet high, sitting on top of my book case and in the act of throwing Marina's flowers to the floor. "Hey," I said as the little man

sneezed again.

He frowned over at me. "Now it's you." His voice was high and nasal, sounding as though he were straining to sing a high note. "First these flowers set off my allergy and now you see me a full day before the test invasion."

I rubbed my eyes. "Invasion?"

He jumped lightly from the top shelf. "I might as well fill you in. We're from Peregrine."

"Wait now. You and all those other wicker urns. You're really people?"

"We have unique abilities. One of which is the knack of metamorphosize into animate and inanimate objects."

"And you're invading Weldon?"

"As a test. Only in this territory. If we can work it here we'll wire home and a full invasion force will come."

"The test is set for tomorrow?"

"I know," the Peregrinian said, "you're worried that it will upset your sale. The thing you don't realize is that the sale is what caused us to move our plan ahead."

"Oh?"

"We heard you discussing it and we agreed, telepathically, that we should be able to get into a sufficient number of homes as a result of the sale. Once we are sitting

unobserved on a shelf or table we change and, during the surprise and confusion, we take over." He bobbed his head. "We had originally thought it might take weeks for us to all get sold. This sale of yours will speed things up nicely."

"Suppose it does? Are you strong enough to take over people's homes?"

"We are small and so have to use tricks to get within the walls. However, we have certain powers. The only big hitch is the fact that it takes us several minutes to shift from wicker urn to our natural self. But we have planned our take over for a time when our victims are asleep. Then we'll strike." He patted his chest. "These flowers finally annoyed me to the point of doing something about them. I was shifting back for the past few minutes."

"You know," I said, "I just might not put you guys on sale tomorrow. Then what?"

"Your assistant knows you've been hurt. Should you not show up out there in the morning he will simply allow you to rest and begin the sale without you. He knows nothing about our true nature."

"I'm awake now," I said, starting to swing out of bed. "I'm going to stay awake."

"When we are in this, our real state," the little guy said, "we possess full powers. We can strike people down, control them and, as pertains to your case, put them soundly to sleep." He pointed a yellow finger at me.

I went soundly to sleep.

There was all sorts of galloping. My numb right hand swung out and hit the window clearing button. It was late, bright morning outside. Ladies on some dark six-legged animals were riding away.

From someplace I heard Mrs. Nightcrest's voice. "To the ruins. A pyre. Burn the urns!"

I shook my head and rolled out of bed. I pushed myself off the floor and stood uneasily. The yellow Peregrinian was back to being a wicker urn. Though he seemed to be twitching and maybe he was planning to switch back.

I was half dressed when my door broke in. It was Mrs. Nightcrest. "You were warned and yet the sale signs flew this morning." She glanced at the urn. "One we missed," she said, grabbing it.

"Hey, wait. You're in real trouble if you . . ."

"Put on some clothes and behave decently." She went off, swinging the urn.

When I finally got dressed and out into the store I found Hobie

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down behind a counter. "Too many of them," he said.

"What did she say they were doing?"

"Going to make an example of those wicker urns. Build a bonfire out at the ruins and burn them. Some hundred angry ladies carried off the whole gross."

"Oh, boy," I said. "Those aren't urns at all. They're invaders from Peregrine."

"Back to bed, boss."

"No, I'm not kidding. Let's get the truck," I said. "I'll see if Marina has some extra weapons to loan us, along with her androids."

"She and the androids are all out on patrol," said Hobie as he rose up. "I saw her leave when I opened this morning."

I gathered together my two pistols and one blaster rifle and ran outside. I stuck a quick note on Marina's door and then jumped into the truck. "Come on, Hobie. We have to save the ladies. And we've got to stop the invasion singlehanded."

He had followed me outside. "Okay, boss."

"You'll see," I said, starting up the truck.

The ruins were roughly a mile from the surplus outlet. A couple of acres of scattered stones and

broken columns with a flat round dias in the middle.

We parked up hill and crept carefully toward them. "They're little yellow guys," I told Hobie. "I hope blasters work on them. Now be sure you don't let them get close enough to put you to sleep." I knew we didn't have enough ammunition for all the invaders but I was hoping we could hold them off until Marina could get to the ruins with help.

Something trotted by. I glanced up. It was a Housewife Hussar, her metallic hat at an odd angle, her head downcast. More housewives were drifting by now, pale and disordered.

I stood up, pistols ready. Down on the dias I saw Mrs. Nightcrest shaking hands with a tall tanned man with shortcut white hair. It was Henry Otis Zeffler, the retired crook. Mrs. Nightcrest touched the brim of her hat, which was dented, and jumped back into the saddle. She rode away in an opposite direction.

Soon all the hundred some housewives were gone. There was no sign of the invaders. "Wait here and cover me," I said to Hobie.

Nearer the ruins I noted a sharp chemical smell in the air. "Hey, Mr. Zeffler," I called, waving.

"Bob," he said, smiling. There was a long black and silver rod resting in the bend of his arm.

"Have you seen some short lemon colored guys?" I asked, joining him on the stone platform.

"Them?" said Zeffer. "They're gone."

"They did materialize here, though?"

"Oh, yes. They're all disintegrated. That's what Mrs. Nightcrest was thanking me about." He shook his head. "Failure is always an annoying thing, Bob."

"They failed?"

"I did," said the old man. He slapped the rod. "I know you have a kind opinion of me. I hate to admit to you that for several months now I've been puttering around with a new type death ray."

"That's it there?"

"It's a failure."

"But you disintegrated the invaders."

"Is that what they were?" he asked. His head jerked in the direction of the woods that hid his house from us. "I was coming over here when I heard the ladies riding up." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Bob, I couldn't resist the opportunity for a real test of the death ray. I was trying for the ladies if you can at all understand

that."

"I know Mrs. Nightcrest."

"Exactly," said Zeffer. "As I quietly approached them they began making a pile of those ridiculous baskets, gabbling and tittering all the while. From the protection of a sheltering clump of foliage I aimed my death ray. At that very moment the baskets became agitated. They proceeded to change into small loathsome little men and began attacking the ladies." Zeffer shrugged. "The additional target didn't seem a real hindrance to my test so I fired away." The end of the rod dipped. "Your invaders it took care of in no time at all. Disintegrated every last one of them. But not one lady. A failure, Bob, absolutely."

"There'll probably be other chances," I said. I shook hands and went back up to where Hobie was waiting.

Halfway back to the surplus outlet Marina's cruiser flew over us. I stopped and waved and the YGSPWC cruiser dropped down and landed on the roadway side.

"Zeffer?" asked Marina, climbing free and running to me.

"Not exactly," I said. I swung down out of the truck. To Hobie I said, "Drive on home and I'll see you later."

"Okay, boss." The truck went on.

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"Isn't Zeffler behind the invasion?" asked Marina.

I sat Marina down on a fallen log, took a place next to her. "I'll explain," I said.

When I had given her most of the details she said, "I was right about Zeffler's death ray."

"Except you'd better not do anything about him now," I said. "I'll let our man on Peregrine know about this. But it's a good idea to keep Zeffler in reserve against invasions.

She nodded. "I can see the wisdom in that." Smiling, she said, "This is certainly going to be an interesting outpost."

"Yes, it is."

"I might even join you for a cup of coffee now," said Marina.

Which she did.

And that, Chief, is what happened to the wicker baskets.

Sincerely,
Bob Dadigan

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CHASE

is America's Newest and Most Exciting Crime Fiction Magazine. Published by the editors of Gamma, its first issues will contain names familiar to the mystery and suspense fiction aficionado: Mickey Spillane, Dell Shannon, Robert Bloch, Robert Turner, Dorothy B. Hughes, Day Keene, Stuart Palmer, Henry Farrell, and Ian Fleming. For exciting, suspenseful reading, don't miss it!

Appropriately enough, as becomes a writer whose books have a vast number of readers on both sides of the Atlantic, Patricia Highsmith was born on January 19, Edgar Allan Poe's birthday. A native of Texas, she was the only child of two commercial artists. She was brought to New York at the age of six and received her schooling there, graduating from Barnard College in 1942. No less an authority than the British Encyclopedia of Crime and Criminals, edited by Sir Harold Scott, a former chief of Scotland Yard, has acclaimed her as a trailblazer in the field of the crime novel. Alfred Hitchcock made her first novel *Strangers on a Train* into one of his most successful thrillers, and the French turned her later novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* into an excellent movie called *Purple Noon*, which won critical raves everywhere. Another French film, *The Murderer* based on her book *The Blunderer* should reach U.S. movie houses soon. Miss Highsmith has had stories in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Story* and other magazines and in the O'Henry Prize Story series. She has received special awards from the Mystery Writers of America and has received the coveted Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere in France. Heinemann of London will soon publish her novel *The Two Faces of January* and she is currently working on a novel with a prison setting, *The Glass Cell*.

At present, after having tried Positano and Rome as writing bases, she is living and working on the windy east coast of Suffolk. *The Snail Watcher*, a fantasy, reveals Miss Highsmith's talent for mingling horror, suspense and atmosphere at its best.

THE SNAIL WATCHER

Patricia Highsmith

When Mr. Peter Knoppert began to make a hobby of snail-watching, he had no idea that his handful of specimens would become hundreds in no time. Only two months after the original snails were carried up to the Knoppert

study, some thirty glass tanks and bowls, all teeming with snails, lined the walls, rested on the desk and windowsills, and were beginning even to cover the floor. Mrs. Knoppert disapproved strongly, and would no longer enter the

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room. It smelled, she said, and besides she had once stepped on a snail by accident, a horrible sensation she would never forget. But the more his wife and friends deplored his unusual and vaguely repellent pastime, the more pleasure Mr. Knoppert seemed to find in it.

"I never cared for nature before in my life," Mr. Knoppert often remarked — he was a partner in a brokerage firm, a man who had devoted all his life to the science of finance — "but snails have opened my eyes to the beauty of the animal world."

If his friends commented that snails were not really animals, and their slimy habitats hardly the best example of the beauty of nature, Mr. Knoppert would tell them with a superior smile that they simply didn't know all that *he* knew about snails.

And it was true. Mr. Knoppert had witnessed an exhibition that was not described, certainly not adequately described, in any encyclopaedia or zoology book that he had been able to find. Mr. Knoppert had wandered into the kitchen one evening for a bite of something before dinner, and had happened to notice that a couple of snails in the china bowl on the drainboard were behaving very

oddly. Standing more or less on their tails, they were weaving before each other for all the world like a pair of snakes hypnotized by a flute player. A moment later, their faces came together in a kiss of voluptuous intensity. Mr. Knoppert bent closer and studied them from all angles. Something else was happening: a protuberance like an ear was appearing on the right side of the head of either snail. His instinct told him that he was watching a sexual activity of some sort.

The cook came in and said something to him, but Mr. Knoppert silenced her with an impatient wave of his hand. He couldn't take his eyes from the enchanted little creatures in the bowl.

When the earlike excrescences were precisely together rim to rim, a whitish rod like another small tentacle shot out from one ear and arched over toward the ear of the other snail. Mr. Knoppert's first surmise was dashed when a tentacle sallied from the other snail, too. Most peculiar, he thought. The two tentacles withdrew, then shot forth again, one after the other, and then as if they had found some invisible mark, remained fixed in the other snail. Mr. Knoppert peered intently closer. So did the cook.

"Did you ever see anything like this?" Mr. Knoppert asked.

"No. They must be fighting," the cook said indifferently and went away.

That was a sample of the ignorance on the subject of snails that he was later to discover everywhere.

Mr. Knoppert continued to observe the pair of snails for nearly an hour, until first the ears, then the rods withdrew, and the snails themselves relaxed their attitudes and paid no further attention to each other. But by that time, a different pair of snails had begun a flirtation, and were slowly rearing themselves to get into a position for kissing. Mr. Knoppert told the cook that the snails were not to be served that evening. He took the whole bowl of them up to his study. And snails were never again served in the Knoppert household.

That night, he searched his encyclopaedias and a few general science books he happened to possess, but there was absolutely nothing on snails' breeding habits, though the oyster's dull reproductive cycle was described in detail. Perhaps it hadn't been a mating he had seen after all, Mr. Knoppert decided after a day or two. His wife Edna told him either to eat the snails or get rid of them —

it was at this time she stepped on a snail that had crawled out onto the floor—and Mr. Knoppert might have, if he hadn't come across a certain sentence in Darwin's *Origin of Species* on a page given to gastropoda. The sentence was in French, a language Mr. Knoppert did not know, but the word *sensualité* made him tense like a bloodhound that has suddenly found the scent. He was in the public library at the time, and laboriously he translated the sentence with the aid of a French-English dictionary. It was a statement of less than a hundred words, saying that snails manifested a sensuality in their mating that was not to be found anywhere in the animal kingdom. That was all. It was from the notebooks of Henri Fabre. Obviously, Darwin had decided not to translate it for the average reader, but to leave it in its original language for the scholarly few who really cared. Mr. Knoppert considered himself one of the scholarly few now, and his round, pink face beamed with self-esteem.

He had learned that his snails were the fresh water type that laid their eggs in sand or earth, so he put moist earth and a little saucer of water into a big washpan and transferred his snails into

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it. Then he waited for something to happen. Not even another mating happened. He picked up the snails one by one and looked at them, without seeing anything suggestive of pregnancy. But one snail he couldn't pick up. The shell might have been glued to the earth. Mr. Knoppert suspected the snail had buried its head in the ground to die. Two more days went by, and on the morning of the third, Mr. Knoppert found a spot of crumbly earth where the snail had rested. Curious, he investigated the crumbles with a match stem, and to his delight discovered a pit full of shiny new eggs. Snail eggs! He hadn't been wrong. Mr. Knoppert called his wife and the cook to look at them. The eggs looked very much like big caviar, only they were white instead of black or red.

"Well, naturally they have to breed some way," was his wife's comment.

Mr. Knoppert couldn't understand her lack of interest. He had to go look at the eggs every hour that he was at home. He looked at them every morning to see if any change had taken place, and the eggs were his last thought every night before he went to bed. Moreover, another snail was now digging a pit. And another pair

of snails was mating! The first batch of eggs turned a grayish color, and minuscule spirals of future shells became discernible on their surfaces. Mr. Knoppert's anticipation rose to higher pitch. At last a morning arrived when he looked down into the egg pit and saw the first tiny moving head, the first stubby little antennae uncertainly exploring its nest. Mr. Knoppert was as happy as the father of a new child. Every one of the thirty or more eggs in the pit came miraculously to life. He had seen the entire reproductive cycle evolve to a successful conclusion. And the fact that no one, at least no one that he knew of, was acquainted with a fraction of what he knew, lent his knowledge a thrill of discovery, the piquancy of the esoteric. Mr. Knoppert made notes on successive matings and egg hatchings. He narrated snail biology to sometimes fascinated, more often shocked friends and guests, until his wife squirmed with embarrassment.

"But where is it going to stop, Peter? If they keep on reproducing at this rate, they'll take over the house!" his wife told him after fifteen or twenty pits had hatched.

"There's no stopping nature," he replied good-humoredly. "They've only taken over the

study. There's plenty of room there."

So more and more glass tanks and bowls were moved in. Mr. Knoppert went to the market and chose several of the more lively looking snails, and also a pair he found mating, unobserved by the rest of the world. More and more egg pits appeared in the dirt floors of the tanks, and out of each pit crept finally from thirty to forty baby snails, transparent as dew-drops, gliding up rather than down the strips of fresh lettuce that Mr. Knoppert was quick to give all the pits as edible ladders for them. Matings went on so often that he no longer bothered to watch them. But the thrill of seeing the white caviar become shells and start to move — that never diminished however often he witnessed it.

His colleagues in the brokerage office noticed a new zest for life in Peter Knoppert. He became more daring in his moves, more brilliant in his calculations, became in fact a little vicious in his outlook, but he brought money in for his company. By unanimous vote, his basic salary was raised from forty to sixty thousand per year. When anyone congratulated him on his achievements, Mr. Knoppert was quick to give all the credit to his snails and the bene-

ficial relaxation he derived from watching them.

He spent all his evenings with his snails in the room that was no longer a study but a kind of aquarium. He loved to strew the tanks with fresh lettuce and pieces of boiled potatoes and beets, then turn on the sprinkler system that he had installed in the tanks to simulate natural rainfall. Then all the snails would liven up and begin eating, mating, or merely gliding with obvious pleasure through the shallow water. Mr. Knoppert often let a snail climb onto his forefinger — he fancied his snails enjoyed this human contact — and he would feed it a piece of lettuce by hand, would observe the snail from all sides, finding as much aesthetic satisfaction as another man might have from contemplating a Japanese print.

By now, Mr. Knoppert did not allow anyone to set foot in his study. Too many snails had the habit of crawling around on the floor, of going to sleep glued to chair bottoms and to the backs of books on the shelves. Snails spent most of their time sleeping, especially the older snails. But there were enough less indolent snails who preferred love-making. Mr. Knoppert estimated that about a dozen pairs of snails must be kiss-

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ing all the time. And certainly there was a multitude of baby and adolescent snails. They were impossible to count. But Mr. Knoppert did count the snails sleeping and creeping on the ceiling alone, and arrived at something between eleven and twelve hundred. The tanks, the bowls, the underside of his desk and the bookshelves must surely have held fifty times that number. Mr. Knoppert meant to scrape the snails off the ceiling one day soon. Some of them had been up there for weeks, and he was afraid they were not taking in enough nourishment. But of late he had been a little too busy, and too much in need of the tranquillity that he got simply from sitting in the study in his favorite chair.

During the month of June, he was so busy, he often worked late in the evening at his office over the reports that were piling in at the end of the fiscal year. He made calculations, spotted a half dozen possibilities of gain, and reserved the most daring, the least obvious moves for his private operations. By this time next year, he thought, he should be three or four times as well off as now. He saw his bank account multiplying as easily and rapidly as his snails. He told his wife this, and she was overjoyed. She even forgave him

the appropriation of the study, and the stale, fishy smell that was spreading throughout the whole upstairs.

"Still, I do wish you'd take a look just to see if anything's happening, Peter," she said to him rather anxiously one morning. "A tank might have overturned or something, and I wouldn't want the rug to be ruined. You haven't been in the study for nearly a week, have you?"

Mr. Knoppert hadn't been in for nearly two weeks. He didn't tell his wife that the rug was pretty much ruined already. "I'll go up tonight," he said.

But it was three more days before he found time. He went in one evening just before bedtime and was surprised to find the floor absolutely covered with snails, with three or four layers of snails. He had difficulty closing the door without mashing any. The dense clusters of snails in the corners made the room look positively round, as if he stood inside some huge, conglomerate stone. Mr. Knoppert gazed around him with his mouth open in astonishment. They had not only covered every surface, but thousands of snails hung down into the room from the chandelier in a grotesque coagulation.

Mr. Knoppert felt for the back of a chair to steady himself. He felt only a lot of shells under his hand. He had to smile a little: there were snails in the chair seat, piled up on one another like a lumpy cushion. He really must do something about the ceiling, and immediately. He took an umbrella from the corner, brushed some of the snails off it, and cleared a place on his desk to stand on. The umbrella point tore the wallpaper, and then the weight of the snails pulled down a long strip that hung almost to the floor. Mr. Knoppert felt suddenly frustrated and angry. The sprinklers would make them move. He pulled the lever.

The sprinklers came on in all the tanks, and the seething activity of the entire room increased at once. Mr. Knoppert slid his feet along the floor, through the tumbling snail shells that made a sound like pebbles on a beach, and directed a couple of the sprinklers at the ceiling. That was a mistake, he saw at once. The softened paper began to tear, and he dodged one slowly falling mass only to be hit by a swinging festoon of snails, really hit quite a stunning blow on the side of the head. He went down on one knee, dazed. He should open a window, he thought, the air was stifling. And

there were snails crawling over his shoes and up his trousers legs. He shook his feet irritably. He was just going to the door, intending to call for one of the servants to help him, when the chandelier fell on him. Mr. Knoppert sat down heavily on the floor. He saw now that he couldn't possibly get the window open, because the snails were fastened thick and deep over the windowsill. For a moment, he felt he couldn't get up, felt as if he were suffocating. It was not only the smell of the room, but everywhere he looked long wallpaper strips covered with snails blocked his vision as if he were in a prison.

"Ednal!" he called, and was amazed at the muffled, ineffectual sound of his voice. The room might have been soundproof.

He crawled to the door, heedless of the sea of snails he crushed under hands and knees. He could not get the door open. There were so many snails on it, crossing and recrossing the crack of the door on all four sides, they actually resisted his strength.

"Ednal!" A snail crawled into his mouth. He spat it out in disgust. Mr. Knoppert tried to brush the snails off his arms. But for every hundred he dislodged, four hundred seemed to slide upon him



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and fasten to him again, as if they deliberately sought him out as the only comparatively snail-free surface in the room. There were snails crawling over his eyes. Then just as he staggered to his feet, something else hit him — Mr. Knoppert couldn't even see. He was fainting! At any rate, he was on the floor. His arms felt like leaden weights as he tried to reach his nostrils, his eyes, to free them from the sealing, murderous snail bodies.

"Help!" He swallowed a snail. Choking, he widened his mouth for air and felt a snail crawl over his lips onto his tongue. He was in hell! He could feel them gliding over his legs like a glutinous river,

pinning his legs to the floor. "Ugh - -!" Mr. Knoppert's breath came in feeble gasps. His vision grew black, a horrible, undulating black. He could not breathe at all, because he could not reach his nostrils, could not move his hands. Then through the slit of one eye, he saw directly in front of him, only inches away, what had been, he knew, the rubber plant that stood in its pot near the door. A pair of snails were quietly making love on it. And right besides them, tiny snails as pure as dewdrops were emerging from a pit like an infinite army into their widening world.